

A survey on the online information use by specialists in gastroenterology and hepatology

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Introduction

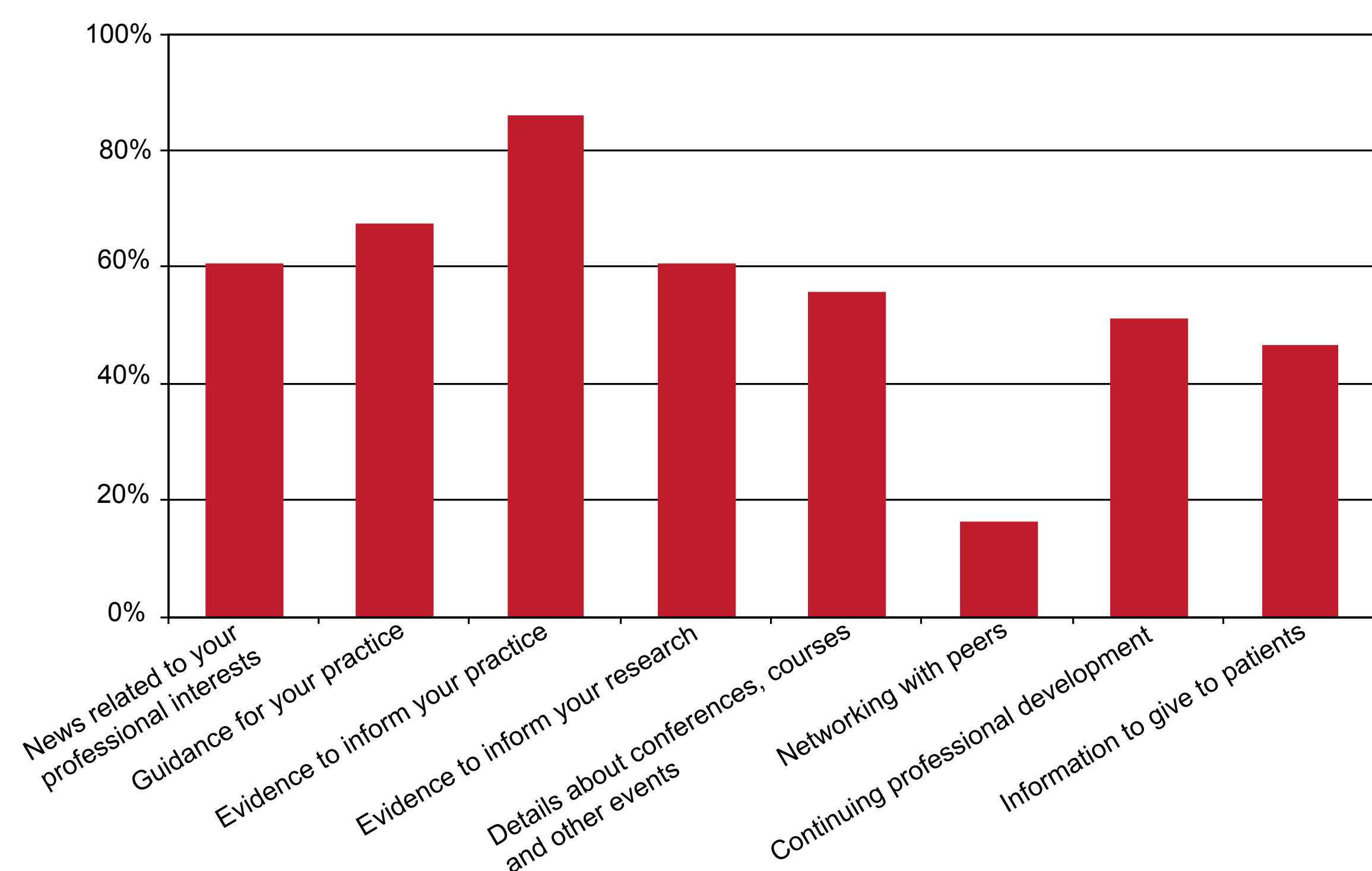
Studies on the information needs and information use of specialist doctors are not as common as those on those working in primary care. For librarians and information professionals working with these groups, it would be useful to know more about their particular behaviour and requirements, and how they will evolve as a generation more accustomed to Internet use make their way through their careers.

I present here the results of a short internet survey that I conducted on online information use amongst specialists (both medical and surgical) in gastroenterology and hepatology. It was conducted using SurveyMonkey. Responses were solicited from the mailing list for NHS Evidence – gastroenterology and liver diseases, from specialists working at the Royal Free Hospital, and from contacts of helpful individuals on the LIS-MEDICAL mailing list.

There were a total of 45 responses, of which 39 completed the survey in full. Of these, 38 were consultants, and 7 registrars. The mean date of qualification from medical school was 1990, with a range from 1969 to 2007.

Reasons for professional use of the internet

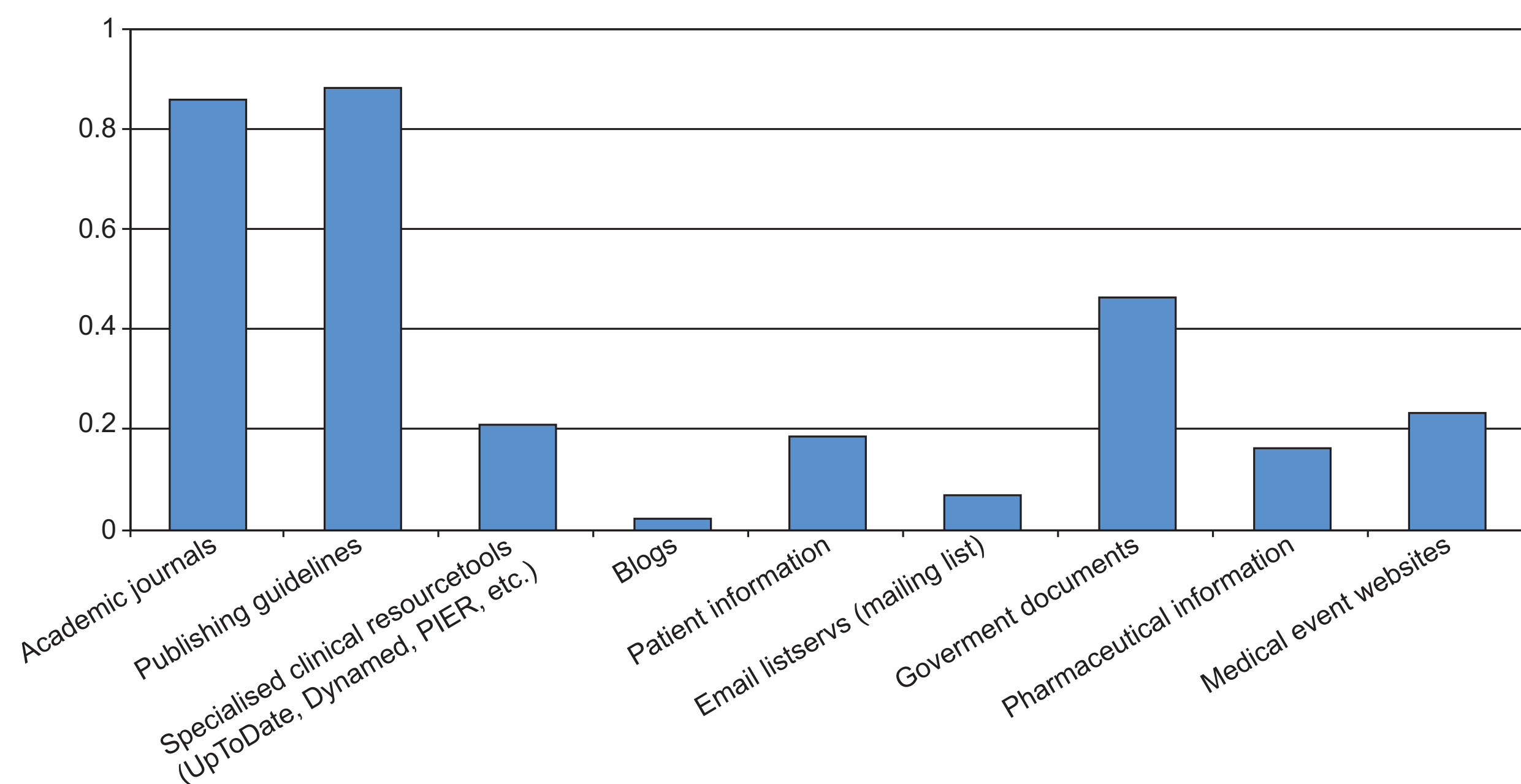
When you use the internet for your professional life, what are you commonly hoping to find or achieve?



Evidence to inform practice was by some way the most commonly given reason that respondents went online, with 86% giving this response. Notably, very few respondents (16.3%) used the internet for the purposes of networking.

Material commonly consulted

When you use the internet for your professional life, what kinds of material do you commonly consult?

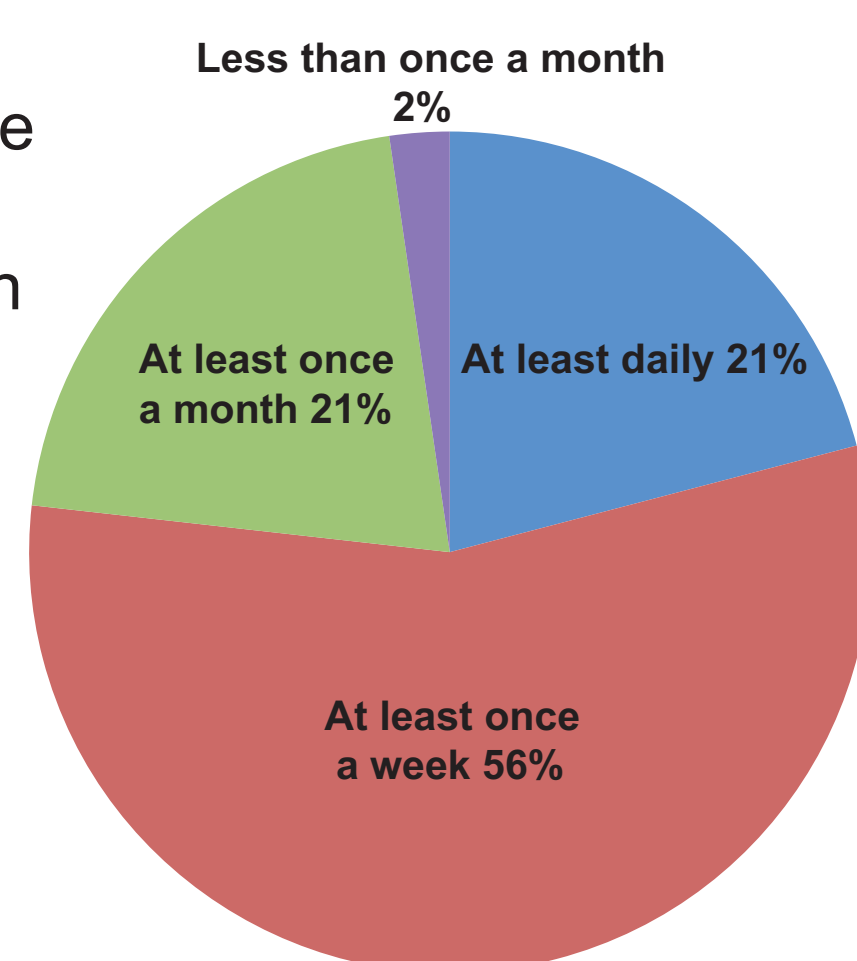


Guidelines (88.4%) and journals (86%) were by far the most commonly consulted resources. Government documents (46.5%) were a rather distant third. Surprisingly few respondents mentioned listservs (7%) and only one was a blog reader.

Frequency of evidence searching

How often do you look online for evidence to inform your practice or research?

Over half of respondents looked online for information about once a week, with the remainder split evenly between those who searched more often and those who searched less often.



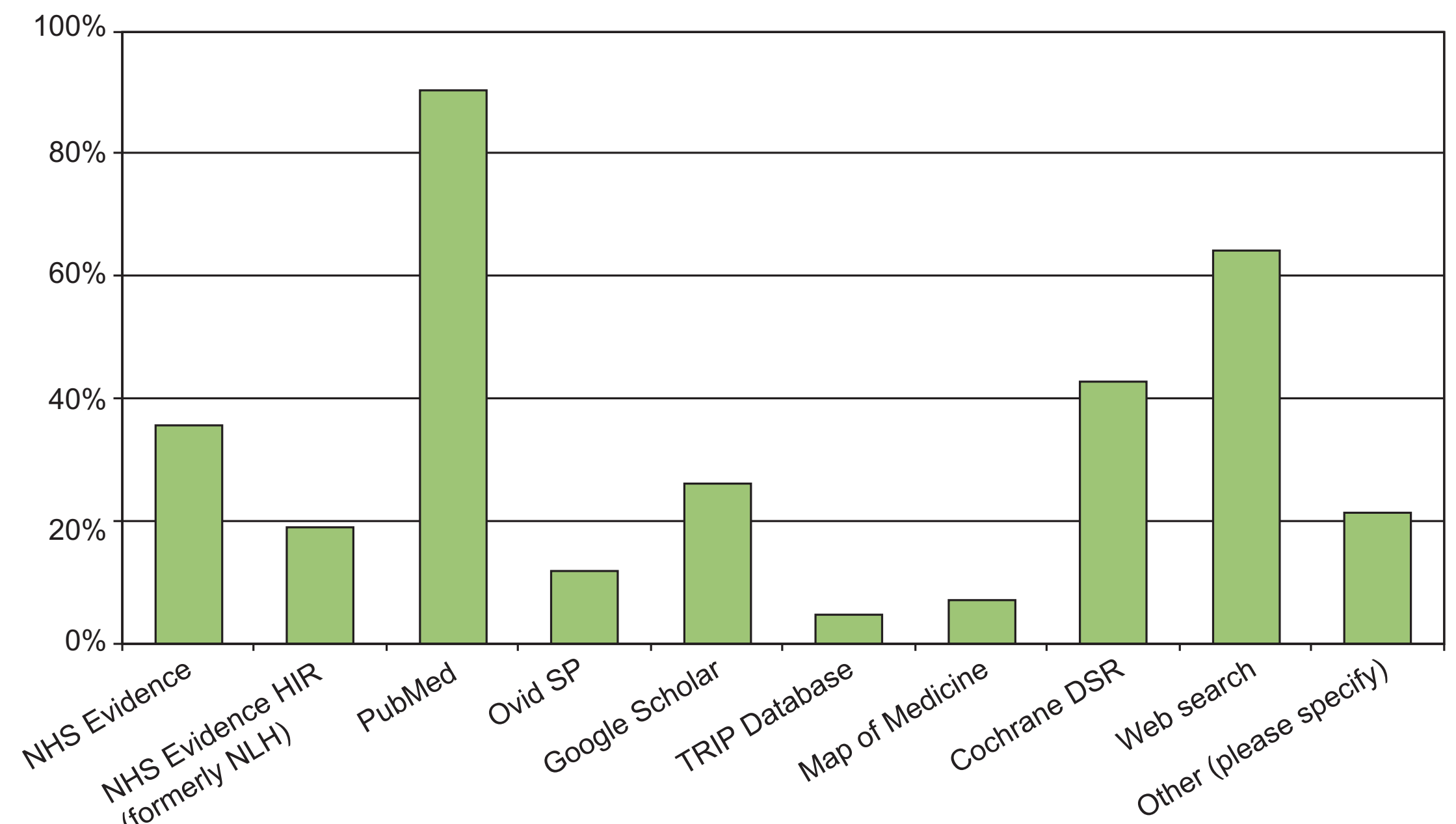
Conclusions and further directions

Tastes were generally conservative; there was little use or enthusiasm for most of the more interactive features or web 2.0 tools that have emerged over recent years. This survey did not indicate this was changing amongst the younger generation, but we did get far more responses from consultants than from specialists in the earlier parts of their careers. Whether there really is a generation gap is something that might warrant further investigation.

Awareness of NHS Evidence services seemed reasonable, although, with responses being solicited from a Specialist Collection newsletter, the question of bias must be considered. The features of the current Specialist Collections, in fact, match the most popular features from the final question quite closely, with the possible exception that original material, not a major focus of most Specialist Collections, was the second most popular feature listed in that question.

Particular resources commonly used

Which resources do you commonly use to find evidence to inform your practice or research?

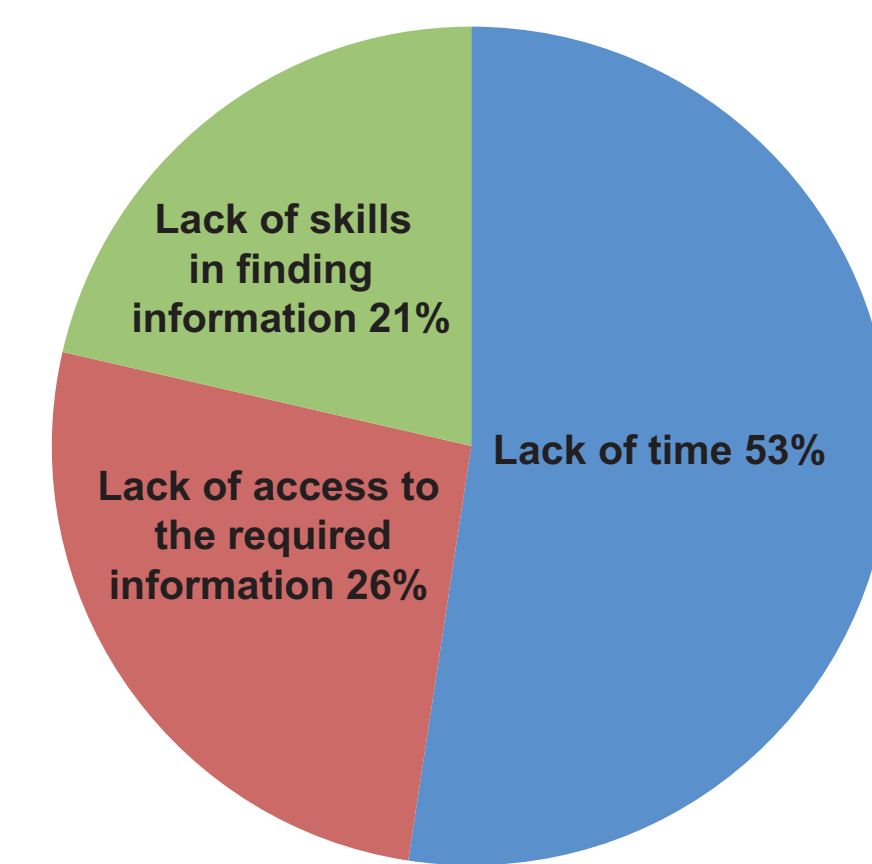


PubMed was the clear winner amongst individual sources used to look for evidence, with 90.5% of respondents reporting using it. In second place was regular web search (Google, Bing, etc.) Awareness of the NHS Evidence search engine appears to have been fairly respectable amongst respondents, with 35.7% reporting use of it, although some respondents may have been unclear of the difference between the various NHS Evidence sites and under the impression that this was a reference to the gastroenterology and liver diseases Specialist Collection (the survey specified the URLs evidence.nhs.uk and library.nhs.uk, but this may not have been fully understood). The most frequent "other" resource specified was UpToDate (3 responses).

Barriers to finding information

What do you perceive as the biggest barrier to being able to find quality information to inform your practice or research?

When asked to choose the biggest barrier to being able to find quality information to inform practice or research from lack of time, lack of access and lack of search skills, 52.4% respondents chose lack of time, with 26.2% lack of access and 21.4% lack of skill.

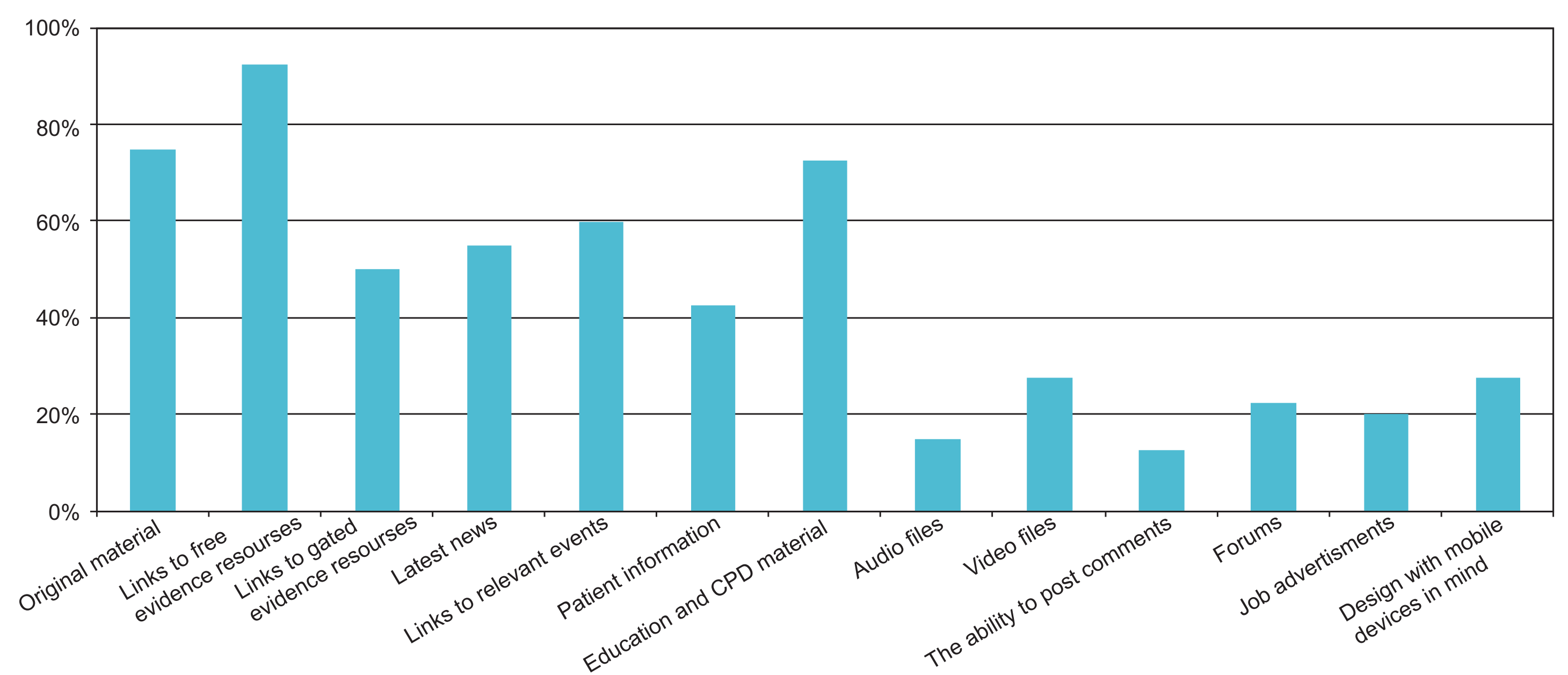


Social networks

Respondents were asked which social networking sites they used in their professional life. The only one that a significant number used was doctors.net.uk, with around 42% of respondents. All other numbers were tiny; two respondents used Facebook, two linkedin, and one doc2doc. Respondents were then asked for their opinions of the usefulness of such sites in their professional lives. All comments left on this question were negative; those who went into more detail said they did not see the point or suffered from too much e-mail already. No trend of greater acceptance of these sites amongst more recently qualified (and therefore perhaps younger) respondents was identifiable from this data.

Features for an online information resource

Which of the following would you consider useful features of a website specifically aimed at gastroenterology and hepatology practitioners in the UK?



Finally, respondents were asked which features they would find useful in an online information resource specifically aimed at UK gastroenterology and hepatology specialists. Popular were links to free resources, original material, and education and CPD material. "Web 2.0" features such as forums, comments and podcasts were not thought particularly useful. Other suggestions included an image library, debates on contentious issues, humorous articles, clinical calculators and a directory of users.