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Content randomization: a method to compare guidelines presentation formats. A randomized controlled trial in the Finnish citizens' health portal.

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Background and Aim: It is challenging to write patient versions of guidelines that patients can engage with when making healthcare decisions. DECIDE was an EU-funded project that developed formats for presenting evidence in patient versions of clinical guidelines.

Our aim was to compare the effects of DECIDE patient versions to those of traditional patient versions of guidelines used in the citizens' portal.

Methods: The guidelines producers at Duodecim in Finland created a system that enables randomizing users of the health portal to two or more different presentation formats. Users of the Finnish citizens' health portal were randomized either to the DECIDE type of patient versions (with explicit and patient-friendly presentations of evidence) or traditional patient versions. Outcomes were measured included understanding, intention and perceived usefulness of the presentation. The outcomes were measured with short Internet surveys and with Likert scales from 1 to 7.

Results: The randomized controlled trial was carried out in 2015 with four guidelines examples (salt reduction, home measurements for hypertension, antibiotics for flu and use of cough medicines). A total of 426 randomized health portal users answered the Internet questionnaires. With the salt reduction example, the patient information with specific DECIDE type of evidence initiated more intention to follow the guideline than the ordinary presentation format ($p=.039$). The answerers also found the DECIDE format more useful ($p=.017$).

Conclusions: Content randomization is a feasible technique that enables comparative studies to help guidelines production. Randomized controlled studies can be conducted within the framework of a health portal for citizens. There is some evidence in our pilot study that evidence based presentation formats create more adherence to guidelines than the traditional formats.