What we can learn from article access data in times of crisis?
Clinical knowledge is inherently dynamic, but it has been especially so since early 2020. As COVID-19 grew into a pandemic of global proportions that challenged healthcare on all fronts, clinicians and researchers struggled to stay current with constantly evolving knowledge about the disease, the novel coronavirus behind it, and the latest treatment options.

In addition to a new and complicated mix of symptoms presented by patients who had contracted COVID-19, scientific discovery and recommended treatments continued to evolve at a rapid pace throughout the pandemic’s first year. This emerging clinical knowledge and evidence was and continues to be critical to advancing best practices and optimal care outcomes.

Synoptic content that comprises clinical summaries of evidence-based information can be a powerful asset at the point of care. Still, it falls short in times of unusually rapid changes in scientific knowledge. Clinicians need timely and easy access to the latest in-depth, evidence-based clinical knowledge, especially in times of crisis when there is not enough time to wait weeks or months for synoptic content to be published.

In-the-moment access to the most current information is tremendously valuable for clinicians who are busy treating patients, especially as disinformation or “social media-grade” information bombards both patients and clinicians at the same time. But it can also be vitally useful for hospital systems and administrators, especially if healthcare leaders can track search data within reference tools to understand what clinical information their clinicians need and in what form they need it. This data is a valuable tool for maintaining high quality of care standards as the clinical knowledge about COVID-19 continues to evolve quickly.

Search within reference tools data is valuable for maintaining high quality of care standards as the clinical knowledge about COVID-19 continues to evolve quickly.
COVID-19 research trends follow historical precedent

Usage data from ClinicalKey, Elsevier’s clinical knowledge solution, since the onset of the COVID-19 crisis provides valuable insights into what physicians and caregivers have been most concerned about. In past pandemics and epidemics, we have seen a pattern of sharply increasing research and knowledge discovery activity during and immediately following the acute phase. While deeply understanding all dimensions of an infectious organism or disease takes time, the period of heightened clinical interest and knowledge inquiry is typically at the beginning of the organism’s spread (see Figure 1). Throughout 2020, the trend for COVID-19 research showed a similar trajectory (see Figure 2).

There continues to be a tremendous amount of new and evolving research and knowledge produced as each new major study is completed, as evidenced by the news in the press and social media. Each study or report delivers discoveries and insights that add to our institutional knowledge about COVID-19 and the novel coronavirus.

All of this evolving clinical knowledge should contribute to constant adjustments or refinements to treatment decisions at the point of care. But the interest in COVID-19 has dipped significantly since the initial acute phase of the crisis. This high demand for information at the start of the pandemic is reflected in access patterns in ClinicalKey for COVID-19-related searches. This is wholly in keeping with patterns established for previous epidemics and health crises.
The ClinicalKey search volume pattern for healthcare organizations in the U.S., for example, is broadly similar to search trend patterns in other countries (see Figure 3 and Figure 4).

However, what varies between these countries are the time frames and the degree of rise and fall. One can correlate regional factors with the periodic increases in knowledge searches. There are contextual reasons—such as infection rates, regional spikes, acuity levels, public awareness of the crisis, and media effectiveness—that likely contribute to these regional patterns’ differences.

**COVID-19 Related Journal Articles Accessed in Clinicalkey**

Access data can inform continuous improvement care strategies

Clinicians are only human. External factors drive them to seek out relevant clinical knowledge. When those external drivers become less acute, clinicians tend to scale back their search for new knowledge. Unfortunately, just because the acute phase has passed, the continual accumulation of critical clinical evidence does not cease.

Knowledgebase search tools may demonstrate interest levels among providers, but they are insufficient in and of themselves to foster inquiry. Healthcare leaders must also build and nurture a culture of continuous clinical process improvement and an unwavering focus on quality patient care based on the latest evidence and practice standards.

Awareness of and insights into how and when healthcare professionals access and use clinical knowledge via knowledgebase search tools can help healthcare leaders develop better, more effective continuous learning tools and strategies. It is imperative to encourage clinicians to keep up with the latest clinical knowledge and care process improvements. This can be done, for example, by assigning ground round presentations or articles for Journals Club. Functionalities within ClinicalKey, such as journal alerts or saved searches, can also motivate clinicians to stay current, ensuring they don’t miss or overlook critical emerging clinical evidence in a practical way that doesn’t flood them with too much information.
COVID-19 has increased the challenge for healthcare professionals and organizations always to be knowledgeable, skilled, and equipped with the latest evidence-based information, developing treatment options, and evolving standards to ensure delivery of the best and latest patient care. Evidence shows, though, that active research into COVID-19—just as with other unexpected health crises—tails off once an area or population is past the acute phase.

Using access data for knowledgebase search tools can guide clinical leadership to reinforce a culture aligned with evidence-based medicine and the highest levels of quality care. And with ClinicalKey, your clinicians have access to the latest ground-breaking research findings so they can truly practice from the most current evidence.

Learn more at elsevier.com/clinicalkey

Other Resources

