

## **Health Communication and the Internet: An Analysis of Adolescent Language Use on the *Teenage Heath Freak* Website**

Catherine Smith, Svenja Adolphs, Kevin Harvey, Aidan McFarlane and Louise Mullany

### **Background**

This paper will report on the findings of a collaborative study examining the communicative strategies of adolescents in computer-mediated health care communication. Recent technological advancements have resulted in the emergence of professionally-run online health communication forums and one such UK-based website entitled *Teenage Health Freak* provides the unique opportunity to analyse the different styles and registers that adolescents chose to express their health concerns.

### **Data and Methods**

This project combines the expertise of linguists and general practitioners working on data taken from an 8 million word longitudinal corpus comprising messages written by adolescents about their health concerns to request medical advice from a qualified general practitioner. A variety of tools and techniques taken from computerised textual analysis, including corpus linguistics, are applied to the data set in order to identify specific linguistic patterns of usage.

### **Findings**

The findings include valuable insights into how adolescents articulate representations of their own bodies through their selection of particular registers and written styles, including the use of slang and taboo language. The electronic forum provides a medium of communication for adolescents where their identities are anonymous, enabling them to articulate their health care concerns on topics that may cause embarrassment and/or a lack of disclosure if discussed face-to-face.

### **Applications**

The paper will conclude by reporting upon the production of an encyclopaedic resource designed to be of practical benefit to health care practitioners working with young people, as well as being a resource for parents, educators and adolescents themselves.