

CHRE

Review of online health professionals registers

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1. Executive summary

1.1 Introduction

This report relates to a qualitative research study conducted by Synovate in September 2009 on behalf of the Council for Healthcare Regulatory Excellence (CHRE). The central aims of this study were to review and compare the nine online health professionals registers currently available to the public and to establish 'best practice', in terms of both format and content, to which all the registers should aspire.

1.2 Methodology and sample

Synovate devised an online qualitative methodology for this study. We spoke to a total of 54 participants in two online panels, run simultaneously over a period of five days. We recruited participants from across all four countries of the UK, fulfilling quotas on age, gender, socio-economic grade and ethnicity. Please see section 2.3 for details.

1.3 Key findings

Public awareness of online health professionals registers is low and understanding of what they can be used for is limited. Having visited the registers, most participants agreed that online registers are primarily for verifying the legitimacy of a specific health professional, and secondarily for finding a practitioner in the local area. Some claimed they would use them as a final spot-check to support independent research and word-of-mouth recommendation, but in most cases would not rely on a register as the sole source of information on a health professional.

The nine registers differ in the degree to which they meet public expectations. All the registers deliver the core functionality required to verify that a given professional is or is not on the register. However, they vary in the amount of detail they provide about

registrants. Most of the registers do not provide all of the following information, which is considered essential by users:

- Fitness to practise details
- Registrant's formal qualifications
- Address of registrant's practice

This essential information is required to support the registers' primary function as a check to verify the legitimacy of a health professional. However, there is some demand for the registers to provide enough information to enable the public to find a health professional in their local community. If the registers are to fulfil this purpose, additional information and functionality would be required, including a 'search by area' function, practice opening hours and contact telephone number.

It is also important to note that participants' views of the registers were affected by the ease of navigating to them from the regulators' home page, as well as by the functionality and information provided in the registers themselves. Accessibility and ease of locating the registers is of great importance, as potential users may give up if they are unable to locate a register quickly within the host website. The most popular registers are those which couple detailed search results with an uncluttered, easy-to-navigate design.

2. Research overview

2.1 Background

Online health professionals registers fulfil a number of key functions in terms of public protection:

- They help members of the public to identify registered professionals and informing them of any limits imposed on the way a registered professional is allowed to practice
- They provide information about professionals so the public can find out if a professional is an appropriate specialist
- They assure the public that professionals are regulated and are required to meet certain standards

Previous research, conducted in 2006, has given some insight into patient and public expectations of registers, including the overall finding that people expect more detail than is currently available. The research also highlighted the issues of low awareness and low likelihood to use registers when making a complaint about a health professional. Since this research took place, some regulators have invested in the development of their online register, which means there is currently variation in the type and extent of the information made available across the nine registers.

2.2 Objectives

As part of its primary purpose to promote the health, safety and well-being of patients and other members of the public, CHRE wishes to determine how to maximise the contribution that online registers of health professionals can make to public protection.

The aim of this research study was to update CHRE's knowledge of patient/public expectations of registers and to establish what an ideal online register would look like and include. Specific objectives were to:

- Review current online registers provided by the regulators

- Establish which elements of these registers are considered essential and desirable by patients and the public
- Identify what is considered best practice in terms of format and information provided
- Explore views on how improved registers would be useful to patients and the public

2.3 Methodology and sample

Synovate devised an online methodology for this study. We spoke to 54 participants in total, in two online panels conducted simultaneously over a five-day period. Panel A contained members of the public who had only used their GP, dentist, pharmacist or optician once or twice in the year prior to research. Panel B contained members of the public with ongoing health needs or direct experience of other regulated professionals (besides GPs, dentists, pharmacists and opticians).

Sample breakdown

Location	22 x England, 10 x Wales, 11 x Scotland, 11 x Northern Ireland
Gender	28 x Male, 26 x Female
Age	12 x (18-30), 18 x (31-50), (13 x 51-65), (11 x 65+)
Socio-economic grade	27 x ABC1, 27 x C2DE
Ethnicity	43 x White British, 11 x Non-White British

2.4 Research schematic

Day 1

- Introduction to research
- Previous experiences of online registers
- Review of General Medical Council register

Day 2

- Review of three registers: General Dental Council, General Chiropractic Council, General Osteopathic Council

Day 3

- Review of three registers: Health Professions Council, Royal Pharmaceutical Society of Great Britain, General Optical Council
- Fitness to practise information

Day 4

- Review of final two registers: Nursing and Midwifery Council, Pharmaceutical Society of Northern Ireland
- Discussion of best register overall
- Using registers to find a health professional

Day 5

- Determining an ideal register
- Assessing the most beneficial uses of registers for the public

5.4 ^ Tom L ^ 9/24/2009 8:00:00 AM

Question of the day: Using registers to find a professional (a specialist or one practising locally)

Do you think you would use a register to help you find a local health professional? If so, when?

What other sources would you use? (E.g. Google, Yellow Pages, Word of Mouth, NHS Choices, Dr Foster)

What would need to happen to the registers you have looked at to make them useful in searching for a specialist or a professional working locally?

Thanks!

> REPLY TO THIS QUESTION | > EDIT QUESTION

↳ **5.4.1** **Robert Y** 9/24/2009 10:41:11 AM

I would definately use a register in future now that i know what I am doing. I do use google quite a lot and word of mouth. I think there has to be better awareness of the register so that people know its actually there. Public awaeness - all important !If people don't know its there - it will not be used

> ADD/VIEW NOTE | > REPLY TO THIS MESSAGE | > EDIT POST | > DELETE POST

↳ **5.4.2** **George S** 9/24/2009 11:33:45 AM

Yes I would use a register when i needed a local practitioner. I don't know if things like google can always be trusted so a proper site that vest the doctors before putting them on their list would be helpful. dont

> ADD/VIEW NOTE | > REPLY TO THIS MESSAGE | > EDIT POST | > DELETE POST

Figure 1: Excerpt from online registers panel A

To make it easier for participants to test the registers, we gave them the name of a particular health professional on each register and asked them to search that name. For each register, we asked participants to consider the questions below:

Thinking about the register in general:	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How easy is it to find the register on the site? • What do you think of the way it looks? • How easy is it to use the register?
Thinking about the specific information we asked you to search for:	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How easy is the information presented to understand? • How useful was the information given by the register? • Which information do you think you might use personally? • Is there any information that could be taken out or needs adding in?
Overall:	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How credible and reassuring do you find this register, and why? • Does it match your needs and expectations? • How does it compare to other registers you've looked at so far?

3. The findings in detail

3.1 Online registers – attitudes and usage

3.1.1 Awareness and understanding

Awareness and understanding of online health professionals registers is low. Many people have never heard of online health professionals registers, and most have never had cause to use one. Understanding of what registers are and aim to do is therefore limited. Some misconceptions about registers include:

- They store patient records and medical histories
- They contain details on NHS employees only
- They provide general information and advice about health issues

“I suppose they are for keeping medical records online and accessible to health professionals who might need to look at your medical history.”

Ruth, Panel A

“I have used an online HPR fairly recently. I needed some physiotherapy done to my knee and went online to see what provision there was in the area.”

Robert, Panel A

“My understanding is that every health professional employed by the NHS is on the register and any notable work or specialist field is listed.”

Judy, Panel B

After visiting the registers, most consider their principal use to be for validating the credibility of a specific health professional in terms of identity, qualifications and meeting required industry standards. The limited detail available on the registers means they are viewed as a simple spot-checking tool – having found a health professional by other means, people would turn to the registers to check that they are legitimate and registered.

“It gives you peace of mind knowing that they are registered and being able to see the qualifications they have obtained.”

Ciara, Panel A

Some can see a potential benefit in using registers to search for a health professional in their local area. However, many feel that the information on registers alone would not be sufficient to justify choosing one professional over another. Healthcare is a sensitive area and reputation is critical for many. Registers can provide ‘raw data’ about who is registered, but cannot give a sense of who offers the best service.

“A registry may be useful to check out somebody you have an appointment to see, but it doesn't seem the best way to just pick out a name at random from an online registry.”

Gerry, Panel B

3.1.2 Actual usage

We found that for many people, choosing a health professional is a two-stage process of research and recommendation. As most are currently unaware of the online registers, they tend to look online, on Google or Yell.com, or in the Yellow Pages when searching for new health professionals in their area. For those searching for NHS doctors, the NHS Choices website is also popular. When they have found one or several suitable-sounding professionals, they then attempt to get a sense of how good these individuals are at what they do and what kind of reputation they enjoy. To do this they turn to word of mouth recommendation from friends and family, or trusted doctors

with whom they have an existing relationship. Some people will turn straight to word of mouth recommendation if they can, bypassing completely the initial stage of independent research.

Many participants do consider the registers to be of practical use in this process. Having visited the registers during the research process, some claimed they would use them again in future, to provide an additional layer of security when choosing a health professional. Typically, they would consult the registers after finding a professional through other means, and treat the presence of a name on the registers as a form of impartial recommendation. Some might also use the registers to find a professional in their area, but this would depend on the functionality of the register in question.

“I would especially use it if I was looking for a private specialist instead of an NHS specialist, to find out more information before agreeing to any procedures.”

Caroline, Panel A

Others rely exclusively on word of mouth recommendation and so would not feel the need to use the registers at any stage.

“I really don't think I would use a register to search for a health professional. I guess word of mouth and GP recommendations are good enough for me.”

Graham, Panel B

3.2 Fitness to practise

There is a widely held view that registers should provide fitness to practise information in search results for registrants. Nearly all participants believed that members of the public have a right to know relevant details concerning the working history of the health

professionals they visit. This includes notice of both suspension and removal from the register.

3.2.1 Suspension

For many people, simply knowing that an individual has been suspended from the register is not sufficient detail – they are keen to know *why* a health professional has been suspended.

“If they have been suspended/removed from the register ... then all information should be available to view. If a health professional puts themselves out there amongst the public then the public have a right to know, same applies for any warnings or conditions placed on them. We have a right to know what they are doing wrong.”

Claire, Panel B

They consider some reasons for suspension to be more serious than others, so they might continue to visit a particular practitioner if the nature of their suspension did not give them cause for concern.

“I certainly think that information about suspension or removal from the register should be available for people to see. It seems unfair just to state they are suspended and not to give a reason why on their part. Some minor offences may cause a sympathetic public to not have a problem whereas major offences should be broadcast to keep other people safe. If someone has been removed from the register I think their name should still appear as otherwise it may seem that a practitioner has just disappeared.”

Ruth, Panel A

A short summary of cause of suspension is sufficient for most users, along with the length of time the suspension lasted/is due to last. Some are wary of having to read through lengthy or overly technical details. Cautions detailed in several lengthy

paragraphs were considered to be in excess of the level of detail required by the public.

“In the Health Professions Council Register a check on [a] physiotherapist reveals an inordinate amount of information regarding his caution. Is this amount of information necessary to make a judgement about whether to use his services or not?”

Jim, Panel A

However, a small number of participants felt that detailing the exact nature of suspensions would be inappropriate, because professionals should have the right for this to remain confidential.

“I do not think that giving information about reasons for suspension or removal would be appropriate. I do, however, think that any warning or conditions should be made public knowledge. I do not feel that health professionals should have to disclose all convictions, especially if it has nothing to do with their work.”

Lynne, Panel B

3.2.2 Removal

Participants felt it was important that registers retain information on professionals who have been removed. Given that most people believe that the primary function of the registers is to verify professional legitimacy, they think it is essential that registers make it clear when a practitioner has been struck off.

On some registers, users feel unsure how to interpret the absence of an individual, because they don't know if that indicates that they have been struck off, or simply that they were never registered in the first place (which need not be a problem on those registers where registration is not obligatory). To avoid this confusion, they argue that

the details of an individual who has been removed from the register should remain on the register.

Some participants spontaneously suggested that registers include a separate list of health professionals to avoid. This would give users peace of mind that a certain professional has or has not been struck off.

“I would want to see a register of the professionals who have been suspended or removed from a register, with the reason and most importantly a picture of their faces.”

Judy, Panel B

3.3 Overview of registers

Although participant reaction varied between registers, some findings hold true across most, if not all, of the registers.

Credibility

All the registers seem essentially credible to the public, because they are affiliated with and found within the official website of a professional body. One participant suggested the word ‘licensed’ would carry a little more weight and formality than ‘registered’.

Functionality

All the registers are successful in their core function – allowing users to verify if a health professional is or is not registered. Beyond this, the level of information provided varies quite widely across registers, but normally falls slightly below expectations. Most people would like to be able to search the registers by geographical area as well as name. Many of the registers only respond to exact spellings of registrant names, which can lead to users being unable to find the person they are looking for, even though they are registered. Several respondents reported examples of this occurring when

they searched the registers, including when they were searching for the health professionals we had directed them to look up. It is therefore likely to be a result of incorrect spelling or mistyping rather than the professionals not being present on the registers. As well as creating a usability issue, this could also lead some to question the credibility of a register which does not contain a professional they know to be reputable, all because they have mistyped the name in the first place.

Accessibility

In nearly every case, some participants had difficulty locating the register within the host site. Signposting needs to be clear on the homepage to avoid some visitors getting confused and giving up. Indeed, participants were more likely to forgive the shortcomings of a register in terms of information or functionality if they had had no difficulties in finding it in the first place from the regulators' homepage.

3.4 The registers in detail

The nine registers are reviewed in no particular order. We asked participants to rank their favourite and least favourite registers, but the pattern of response was not sufficiently clear to be able to accurately rank the registers relative to each other in order of preference. However, where a register was found to be noticeably more or less popular than average, we have made reference to this in the findings section for that register.

3.4.1 General Medical Council

Some participants struggled to find the register within the General Medical Council website. They cited three reasons for this:

- There is too much information on many of the pages, which means they can be overwhelming and confusing
- It is not clear on the homepage which is the best route to the register – ‘The Medical Register’ tab or the ‘Patients and the public’ link?
- The phrases ‘Medical Register’ and ‘List of Registered Medical Practitioners’ seem to be used interchangeably, which can lead some to believe they are different things

"If you want someone to follow an important link it should be at the beginning, be prominent and in larger font."

Judy, Panel B

Others like the way the site is divided into sections for different groups of people, including the general public. This makes the information contained in this section seem tailored to them.

Many people have heard of the General Medical Council, so they trust the site and therefore the register implicitly. This confidence is reinforced by the appearance of the site, which many consider to be both professional and easy on the eye. However, two issues do undermine this credibility somewhat. Firstly, the register does not make it clear if registration is mandatory for doctors, so users do not know how much they should read into the absence from the list of a doctor they know. Secondly, the register only holds Fitness to Practise data from 2005 onwards, so it lacks the detail to fully reassure some users that registrants have always been fit to practise.

Overall, participants found it easy to search the register. The ‘Sounds like’ box is a very useful function for those unsure how to spell their doctor’s name. Unfortunately, the register does not provide users with all the information they are looking for. However, it only tells users if a doctor is registered, their date of registration and their registration number. This is not enough for many users, who would also like to know:

- Where they practise (including contact details)
- What qualifications they have
- What areas of specialism they have (if any)

Because many people do not know the first name of their doctor, practice address details could help users distinguish between two doctors with the same surname.

3.4.2 General Dental Council

The General Dental Council register is one of the most user-friendly of all the registers. Pictures of members of the public rather than dental professionals help reassure the public that this site is for them and not just those working in the industry. Both the 'General Public' section and the register itself were immediately obvious to most participants, for whom the whole website seems uncluttered and easy on the eye. The 'General Public' section is credible and reassuring because it avoids jargon and explains things in simple terms.

The register seems credible as there are many ways to search for dentists – by name, registration number or town (which allows users to search for a dentist in their local area). The 'Search records' button further enhances the register's air of authority.

Some find the link to the NHS Choices website on the register page confusing, because it is not made clear what the difference is between these two lists of health professionals. One participant was confused to find his dentist on NHS Choices but not on the General Dental Council register – he felt this undermined the credibility of the register.

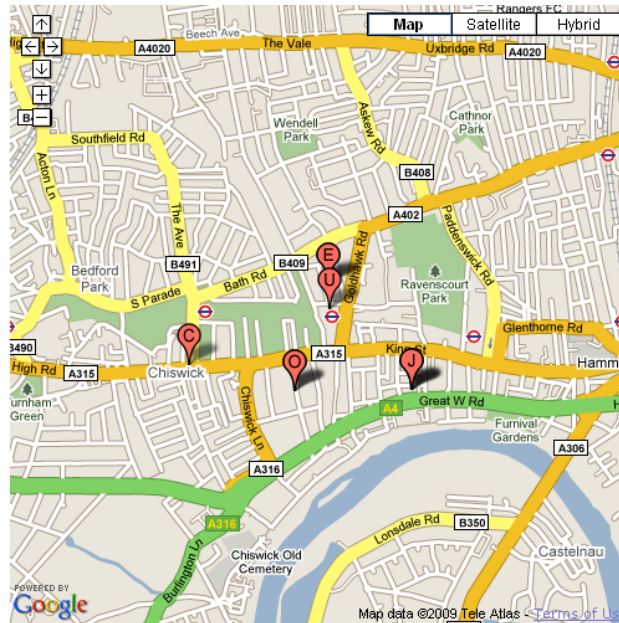
Although participants welcomed being able to see where registrants had received their training and how long they had been practising, they felt the register was lacking in detail overall. Specific information they would like to see added includes:

- A telephone number for each registrant
- A note on whether a particular dentist accepts NHS patients
- More information about a dentist's work and record
- Reason for suspensions/removals

3.4.3 General Chiropractic Council

The General Chiropractic Council homepage clearly states that all chiropractors in the UK need to be registered on the site by law, which lends credibility to the register and makes it easier for users to interpret absence from the register. Most participants found it easy to navigate to the register, but some complained that the font on the homepage was too small. Some felt the homepage news ticker made the site feel targeted at industry professionals rather than the public

As a functional tool to find a chiropractor, the register works well, as it includes a 'Search within' function which yields both a practice address and a contact telephone number. The results page interface also integrates a Google map graphic, which makes practice locations immediately comparable.



A: Garry Russell

Registration Status: Registered - Practising
 Today's Healthcare, 381 Lillie Road, Fulham, London, SW6 7PJ
020 7386 9993
[Show full details](#) [Show route](#)

B: Karl Harm

Registration Status: Registered - Practising
 The Fulham Clinic, Virgin Active - Fulham Pools, Normand Park, Lillie Road, London, SW6 7ST
020 747 1 0499
[Show full details](#) [Show route](#)

Figure 2: Search results on General Chiropractic Council register

However, apart from location, the register does not provide users with the other details they would need to choose a chiropractor in their area, such as level of experience and price.

3.4.4 General Osteopathic Council

The General Osteopathic Council register is one of the most popular overall. This is because it offers extra results features which set it apart from many of the other registers:

- Embedded Google maps save users time
- Search by town function allows users to find local osteopaths
- Additional information about practice opening hours and disabled access reduces the need for further research
- Linking to practice websites makes any further research straightforward

The sheer functionality of the register and the amount of information it offers reassures users of its credibility, giving them the sense that the Council holds accurate information about the osteopaths it regulates.

“It exceeded expectations as they provided information such as opening hours for some of the practices and even website links so you could investigate the Osteopathic clinic further. This also made it feel very credible.”

Ciara, Panel A

There is still some room for improvement. The surname-only name search means users have to scroll through a lengthy list of results if they have searched a common surname. The counties from all countries are mixed together in the drop-down list – ease of use could be improved if users were able to select a country first and then have a choice of counties for that country alone.



Figure 3: Searching by county on the General Osteopathic Council register

3.4.5 Health Professions Council

Participants thought the Health Professions Council register was credible, because:

- The website is neat and simple to navigate
- The explanation of the Health Professions Council provided on the homepage is clear and reassuring
- The registrant expiry details suggest registration lasts just two years, which reassures users that the register is up to date and that everyone registered is fit to practise

Participants welcomed the chance to save time by searching for a variety of professions on the same register. However, searching this register could be difficult as members of the public can sometimes be unsure about the profession of the specialist they are looking up. The register currently insists that users enter the profession of the individual they wish to look up, and if they get this wrong, the search will not work.

In some key areas, the Health Professions Council register does not meet users' information needs:

- It does not provide details on qualifications or address (essential), or telephone number (desirable)
- It does not allow users to search for specialists in their area, only look up ones they already know

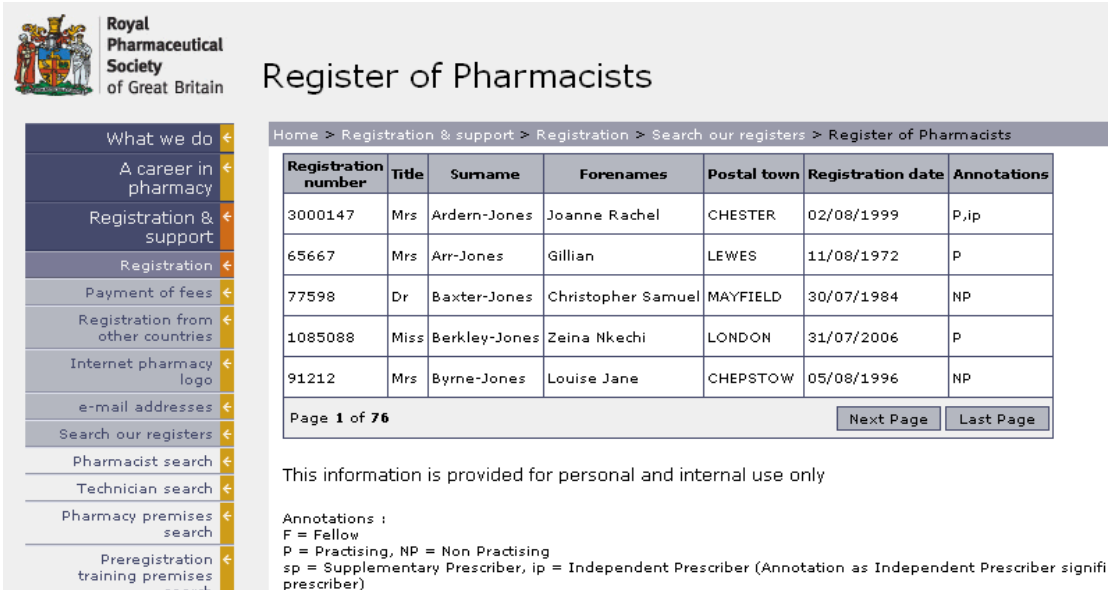
3.4.6 Royal Pharmaceutical Society of Great Britain

Many participants disliked the Royal Pharmaceutical Society of Great Britain register. There were two reasons for this: they found the general website unengaging; and they found the register itself too basic.

Participants felt the Royal Pharmaceutical Society of Great Britain website seemed more like a specialist site for professionals, rather than one for the public. This was driven by the industry news ticker and the fact there is no dedicated section for the general public. Many struggled to navigate to the register, because the link is not immediately obvious on the homepage because it contains so much other text. To compound matters, some of this text is in white on a pale grey background, which some found difficult to read.

The placing of adverts on the homepage could also lead some to question the impartiality of the site, which could damage its credibility.

The register itself yields insufficient levels of information for most users. Search results give no full practice address, or details on qualifications and fitness to practise. The abbreviated annotations in the final column of the results table could seem a little cryptic, and are somewhat unnecessary given the full phrases are all reasonably short. On a positive note, participants appreciated being able to search by first name as well as surname.



Royal Pharmaceutical Society of Great Britain

Register of Pharmacists

Home > Registration & support > Registration > Search our registers > Register of Pharmacists

Registration number	Title	Surname	Forenames	Postal town	Registration date	Annotations
3000147	Mrs	Ardern-Jones	Joanne Rachel	CHESTER	02/08/1999	P,ip
65667	Mrs	Arr-Jones	Gillian	LEWES	11/08/1972	P
77598	Dr	Baxter-Jones	Christopher Samuel	MAYFIELD	30/07/1984	NP
1085088	Miss	Berkley-Jones	Zeina Nkechi	LONDON	31/07/2006	P
91212	Mrs	Byrne-Jones	Louise Jane	CHEPSTOW	05/08/1996	NP

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Annotations :
 F = Fellow
 P = Practising, NP = Non Practising
 sp = Supplementary Prescriber, ip = Independent Prescriber (Annotation as Independent Prescriber signifies prescriber)

Figure 4: Search results on the Royal Pharmaceutical Society of Great Britain are inadequate

It might be better to combine the 'pharmacist' and 'pharmacy' registers, since there is a risk that users will visit the 'pharmacist' register and leave the site completely when they see they can't search by area, unaware that to do this they need to use the 'pharmacy' register instead.

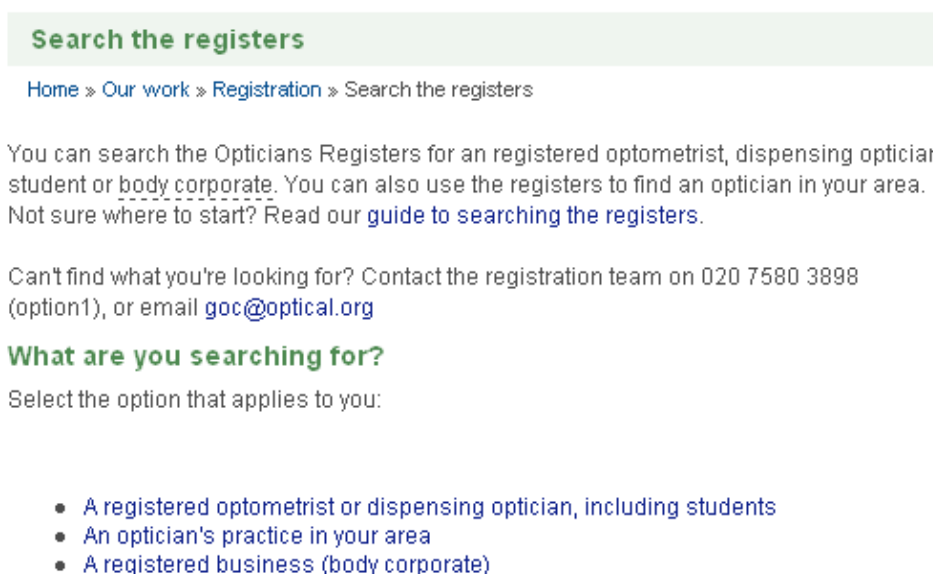
3.4.7 General Optical Council

The General Optical Council register is easy to use and provides a decent level of information for users. Participants generally agreed that the site looks clean and is easy to navigate, although some felt the 'Search the registers' tab is a little buried in the list of links on the left-hand side of the page.

The General Optical Council website actually contains three registers. The register main page does make it clear what each of these are for (see figure 5), but the site could be further simplified by combining all three databases on a single search form. One participant raised concerns that he could find his optician on one register but not on the other, leading him to question the reliability of the registers.

“A bit doubtful about its accuracy. My own optician was unknown, however he became known when I looked by practice. Actual practice only came up when I increased to 10 km range (actual is about 3) – something a bit dodgy there.”

John, Panel A



Search the registers

[Home](#) » [Our work](#) » [Registration](#) » Search the registers

You can search the Opticians Registers for an registered optometrist, dispensing optician, student or body corporate. You can also use the registers to find an optician in your area. Not sure where to start? Read our [guide to searching the registers](#).

Can't find what you're looking for? Contact the registration team on 020 7580 3898 (option1), or email goc@optical.org

What are you searching for?

Select the option that applies to you:

- [A registered optometrist or dispensing optician, including students](#)
- [An optician's practice in your area](#)
- [A registered business \(body corporate\)](#)

Figure 5: The three registers on the General Optical Council site are clearly separated according to search requirements

Linking to Google Maps is helpful when searching for a practice by area, and it could be useful to have this link next to addresses on the opticians register results pages too.

3.4.8 Nursing & Midwifery Council

The accessibility of the Nursing & Midwifery Council register makes it one of the most popular of all. It might lack some of the features of other registers, such as ‘search by area’ or Google Maps, but its simplicity appeals to many users and puts them at ease. The big, colour-coded boxes make the register easy to find from the homepage, which is particularly important because the homepage is otherwise quite busy.

Searching by forename and surname helps users reduce the number of search results they get. The search results themselves offer a decent level of detail, including qualifications (perhaps particularly important for nurses, whose level of qualification can vary widely) and registration expiry date.

“The layout is clear and professional and everything is clear and easy to read. The colour coded boxes help you access the information quickly and easily. The register was great to search and I liked that you could search forenames and surnames.”

Ruth, Panel A

3.4.9 Pharmaceutical Society of Northern Ireland

The Pharmaceutical Society of Northern Ireland website was considered by participants to be one of the easiest to navigate:

- The ‘Search the register’ tab is clearly displayed on the left-hand side
- The homepage is clearly divided into sections for the public and professionals, so users know immediately what information might be relevant to them

However, the register’s search form is too simple and does not allow users to search by first name or area. In addition, registrant qualifications and contact details – considered by many to be essential information – are missing from the search results.

Indeed, the register delivers so little information its credibility could be called into question by some users, as it gives the impression that the Society knows very little about its members.

“I really liked the fact that there was a section for the public and one for the professionals. It looks slick! It was let down by the poor quality of the register, only accepts surnames and the information it delivers is basic to say the least.”

Bryce, Panel A

3.5 The ideal register

When participants had seen all the registers, we asked them to describe what an ‘ideal register’ would look like and how it would work. Broadly speaking, they told us that an ‘ideal register’ would provide many ways to search and detailed search results. Based on their responses here and to other questions during the panel, we have split their suggestions into ‘essentials’ and ‘nice-to-haves’.

3.5.1 Essential functions

The essential functions are based on what participants see as necessary for checking that a professional is registered i.e. using the register as a double check having identified a suitable professional via other sources.

Search criteria

- Registration number
- Surname
- ‘Sounds like’ box or softer search filtering (to accommodate spelling mistakes)

Registrant information

- Full name
- Registration number
- Fitness to practise details (including brief explanation for any disciplinary actions)
- Formal qualifications
- Address of practice (so that users can be sure they are checking the right professional if several registrants share the same name)

3.5.2 Nice-to-have functions

The nice-to-have functions include additional information or search criteria which would enable the registers to act as a tool for finding an appropriate local health professional, rather than simply as a double check on their registration.

Search criteria

- First name
- Search by area/postcode

Registrant information

- Areas of specialism (where applicable)
- Practice opening hours
- Telephone numbers
- Last updated date
- Google maps function
- Registration expiry date

3.5.3 Accessibility

It is clear from the response to each individual register that the ease of navigating to the register from the regulators' home page, and the overall layout and appearance of

the website has an impact on participants' views of the registers. Indeed, registers which had limited search function and information were sometimes popular if they were clearly signposted from the homepage and the overall appearance of the site was simple and uncluttered. Conversely, some registers which offered more functionality or information than others were criticised because they were initially difficult to find.

Overall, therefore accessibility is just as important as functionality. Functionality alone is not enough to encourage people to use and return to the registers. Where registers are not clearly signposted, users will become frustrated and may give up their search.

According to participants, the ideal homepage would:

- Be uncluttered and easy on the eye
- Be divided into separate sections for members of the public and industry professionals
- Include a brightly coloured 'Search the register' tab linking straight to the search page
- Define the role of the council/society in question, to reassure users that they are on a credible site

The idea of a host site for all registers was popular with participants, who claimed they would struggle to remember how many registers there are and which specific professions they cover. They said a single site would avoid confusion about where to go to begin a search. The ideal for some users would be a one-stop shop offering both factual information *and* feedback from patients and fellow professionals. In this guise, registers would encompass both the research and recommendation stages most people go through when choosing a health professional.

4. Conclusions

The central aim of online registers – to help the public identify registered professionals who meet required industry standards – is successfully being put into practice by all the registers. All the registers provide users with the essential functionality required to search for a name in the database. This aim is broadly in line with the public's perception of online registers – that they are primarily for verifying the legitimacy of a specific health professional. But in order to conduct this check thoroughly, many feel that fitness to practise details should be made available on all registers. At the moment, fitness to practise information varies widely in detail between registers, from a single word to several paragraphs. Most people agree that a short explanation of any fitness to practise matters (either current or historical) should be displayed for all registrants. To avoid confusion in the event of absence from the registers, we also recommend that registers continue to carry the names of those who have been struck off, so these professionals are still searchable and users can be sure that they are not legitimate and should be avoided.

Public expectations of the registers stretch beyond the primary function of checking up on a known health professional. Many would also hope to use registers to *find* a health professional in their area and some would even hope the registers could help them *choose* between several registered professionals. Many of the registers perform less well against these expectations, as they do not provide all the relevant registrant information required, such as practice address, fitness to practise details, and level of qualifications. Only four of the nine registers offer a 'search by area' function. Expectations of what the registers should do vary for two reasons:

1. None of the registers makes it clear to users exactly what it can and cannot be used to do
2. Each register offers a differing level of functionality and registrant information, so users do not have a standard 'yardstick' against which to measure all nine registers

To address these issues, we recommend that each register includes on its homepage a short statement of its aims and practical applications for the public, and that CHRE considers developing a standard set of minimum functionalities which all registers would be encouraged to provide.

Register functionality is very important to users, but so too is accessibility. The Nursing & Midwifery Council register is an example of a register which does not provide all the search functions or information people would ideally like, but is still popular because it is so easy to find and use. If visitors are to be encouraged to search the registers and return to use them again in future, it is critical that registers are made as prominent as possible on the websites which host them. Prominence can be achieved by placing a large, brightly coloured direct link to the register on the homepage of the host website. All the registers currently perform well in terms of ease of use, with the exception of one key issue: strong search filtering means that names can only be found on the registers if they are correctly spelt, so many users leave the registers at best confused and at worst concerned by the apparent absence of a known health professional. At present, only the General Medical Council register allows users to soften this level of filtering – we would recommend that all the registers offer a similar function.

The idea of a single register encompassing all fields was popular with respondents, because it would improve the accessibility of the registers by saving users from having to decide which register they need to go to. However, a combined register could prove logistically complicated and expensive to set up. Ease of use could be compromised by the need for a more complex search form and a large number of results across a variety of fields when searching common surnames. A possible solution might be to create a simple host site from where users could follow links directly to each of the nine registers.

Despite the fact that many people rely heavily on word of mouth recommendation when choosing a health professional and some suggest including space on the registers for patient feedback, we strongly recommend that the registers continue to offer entirely factual content. To include comment from the public or fellow professionals would cause many to question the impartiality of the register itself. Including opinion pieces

from any source could seriously damage the credibility of all the information contained on the registers. If they are to retain the aura of credibility they currently enjoy, the registers must continue to present the public with information which is strictly factual and impartial.