

**The public health management of meningococcal disease
in the age of smartphones and social media**

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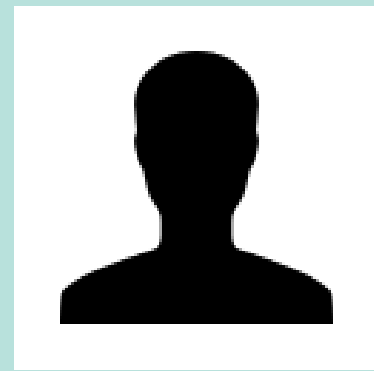
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BACKGROUND

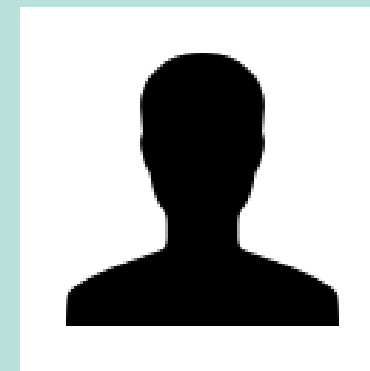
- ❖ London health protection teams [HPTs] are increasingly observing instances where internet access and social media posting has impacted on case management of meningococcal disease (Box 1).
- ❖ The way the public use the internet and access health information is changing. Figures from the Office of National Statistics [ONS] show that increasingly the public, particularly those in younger age groups, are using their smartphones or other mobile devices to access information on the internet, including on health related issues (Box 2).
- ❖ HPTs and other health providers need to consider how best to disseminate timely public health messages in this changing media landscape, whilst also confronting the challenges these technologies can pose.

Box 1: CASE STUDIES IN HEALTH PROTECTION



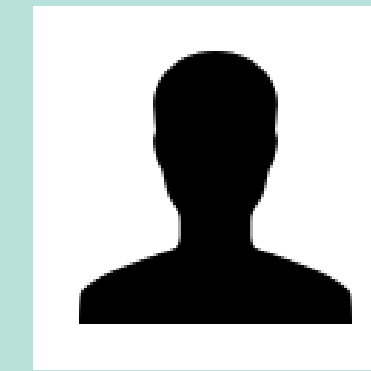
Case 1: Camping trip

Information about this case was shared by family members on social media which, together with subsequent mainstream media coverage, prompted >30 enquiries to PHE from people who stayed on the same campsite asking for advice and/or access to chemoprophylaxis.



Case 2: Bus tour

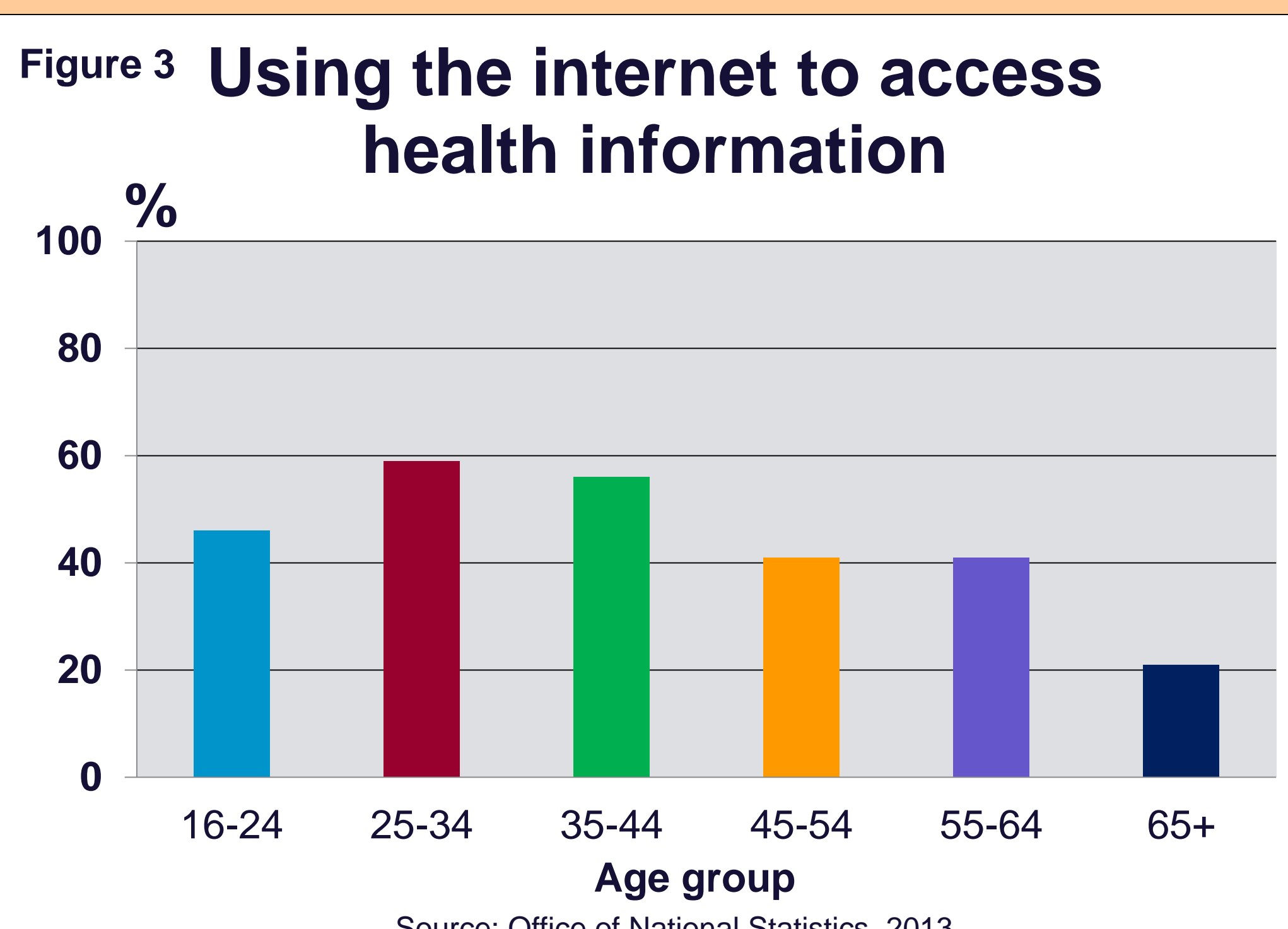
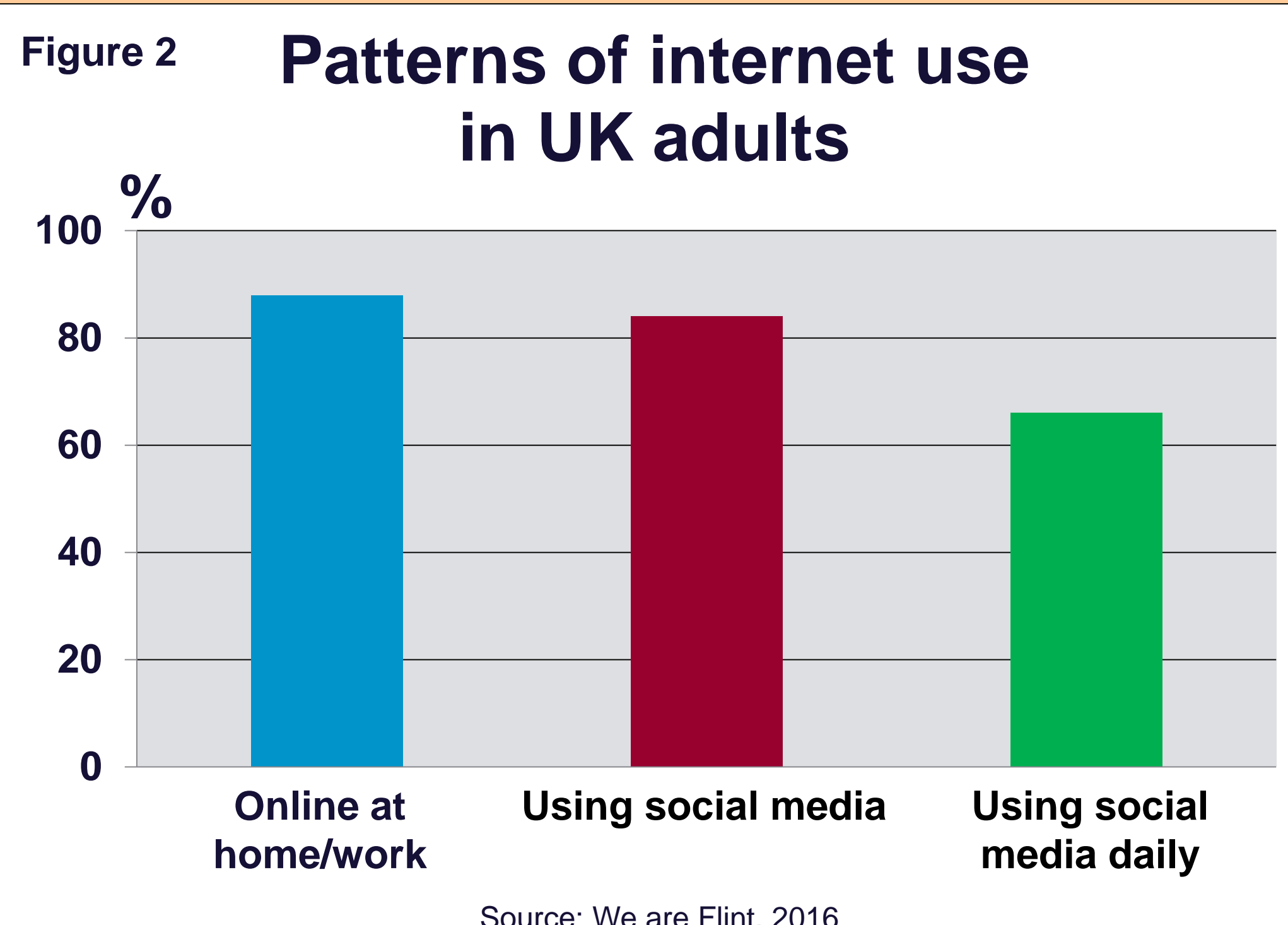
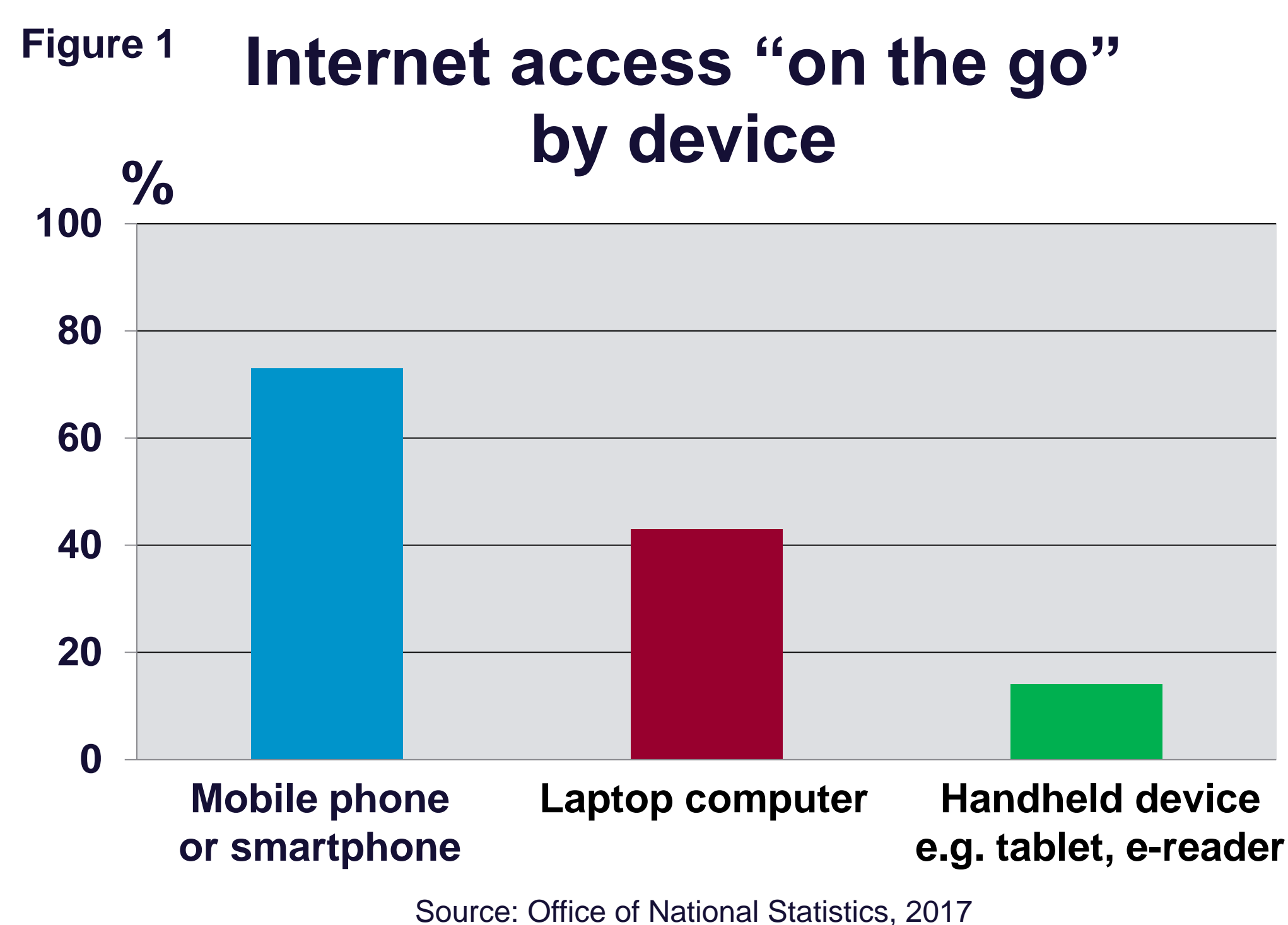
This case became unwell whilst on a bus tour in Europe. Chemoprophylaxis was advised for 50 participants on the tour. Using email PHE was able to communicate with all close contacts, who were spread across various different countries at the time of notification.



Case 3: Nursery school

The nursery and many parents were already aware of this case via posts on social media before PHE was notified and could make contact. Anxiety was high amongst the parent group and several attended hospital requesting chemoprophylaxis for their children.

Box 2: INTERNET USE IN THE UK & ACCESS TO HEALTH INFORMATION



DISCUSSION

- ❖ 73% of UK adults regularly access the internet "on the go" (Fig.1), and 84% use social media (Fig.2).
- ❖ 41% of UK adults use the internet to obtain health information (Fig.4), with almost half of all young people (16-24yrs) choosing to access health information online (Fig.3).
- ❖ The prevalence and ease of internet access could be utilised by HPTs to distribute timely health messages to both communities affected by meningococcal disease, e.g. nurseries/schools/universities via their websites and social media platforms, and to the contact groups of individual cases.
- ❖ However, there could be opposition to HPTs communicating in this way: Institutions might express concern about reputational risk arising from health messages about incidents on their website, and individuals may object to the online reporting of their illness. In addition, HPTs must maintain confidentiality where possible and protect the privacy of individual cases.

Figure 4



Figure 5

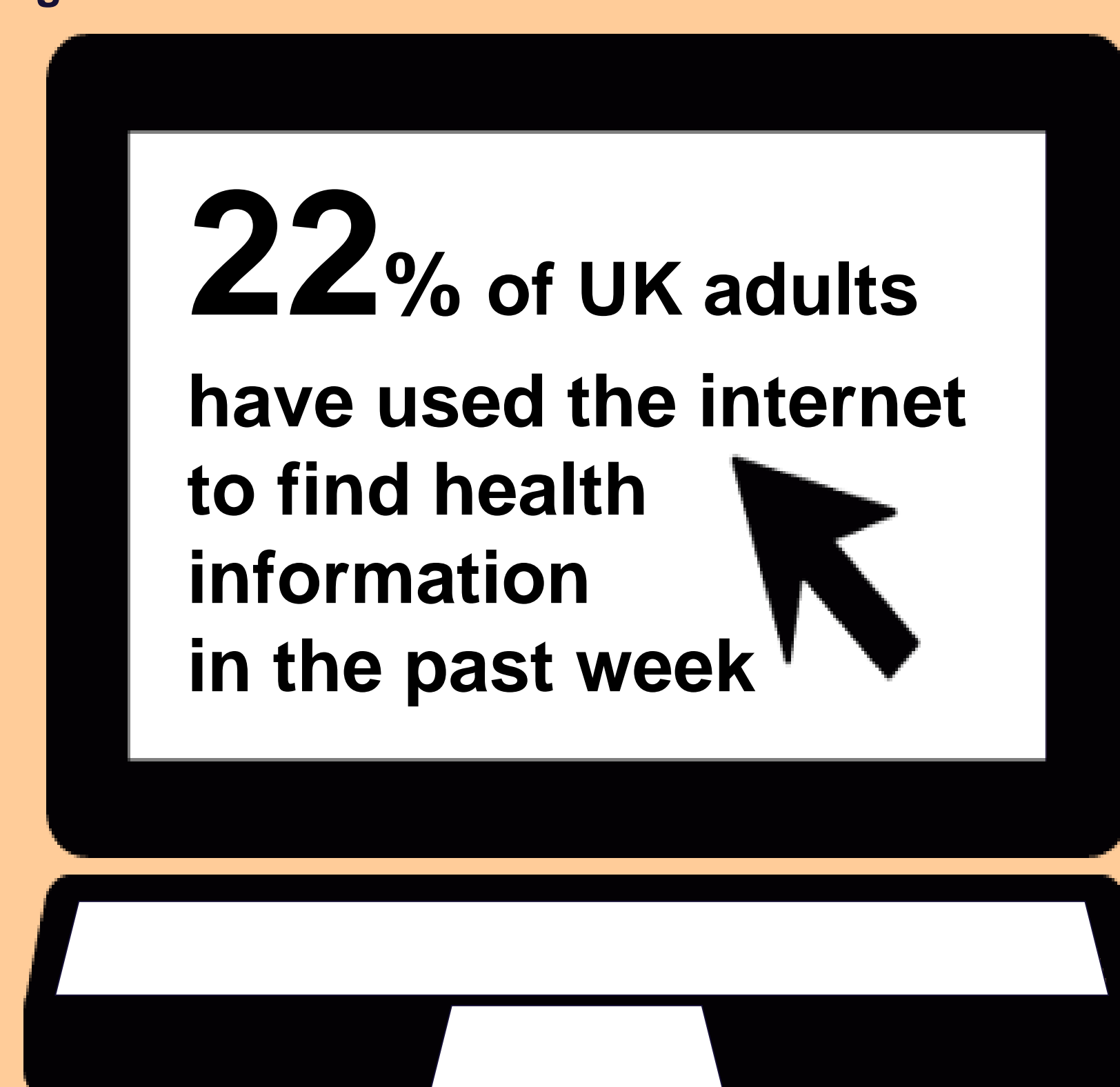


Figure 4 & 5, Source: Ofcom, 2017

RECOMMENDATIONS

- ❖ A review of media research should inform our understanding of the most popular platforms used to ensure health messages are accessed by a target community.
- ❖ Focus groups should be undertaken to assess the acceptability of sharing health advice via institutional websites and social media platforms.
- ❖ More research is needed to assess the feasibility of HPTs using novel approaches to distribute health messages to communities.

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