

Publications and Sources of Information

Bridging the digital divide

Public and private partners have teamed up to facilitate the flow of health information via the Internet. Major awards for electronic communication in science have been approved for four centres in Africa and five centres in central Asia and eastern Europe. This is the first phase of a public/private initiative — the Health Internetwork project — which aims to boost access by researchers and health workers to reliable information via the Internet and to improve global public health by facilitating the flow of information worldwide.

Partners in the initiative include the World Health Organization (WHO) and other UN organizations, the Open Society Institute (OSI), which is part of the Soros Foundation network, leading information providers ISI(r) and Silver Platter, and other public and private partners, possibly including the leading scientific publisher Elsevier.

In the first phase of the study, the nine centres are to be provided with a 'connectivity package' consisting of hardware, wide band connectivity, full access to several databases and more than 100 medical journals (online, full text). For their part, the centres will help work out how to introduce locally-produced information to the Internet, stressing priority public health programmes and local translation and adaptation of content as necessary. They will also decide how to expand the project to the rest of their country and region, and evaluate its impact.

Research, and the sharing of knowledge through research, is fundamental to improving public health. Through the Health Internetwork project, researchers and scientists will begin to read the same journals, search the same databases, join in the same discussion groups, compete for the same grants and it will bring them into the international community of researchers and eventually improve the dissemination of their own results. The project aims to facilitate research in countries that have first-hand experience of diseases and health issues that affect the poor.

After a one-year pilot phase, the intention is to extend the facility to a large number of needy countries. It is anticipated that, by the end of 2003, some 13 000 new health information access points in some 40 countries will be equipped with Internet technology, thus enabling communication and networking among public health information users, and improving monitoring of health situations.

Reference: World Health Organization. <http://www.who.int/tdr/publications/tdrnews/news64/web.htm>

India publishes ethical guidelines for biomedical research

The Indian Council of Medical Research has issued ethical guidelines for biomedical research on human subjects. The foreword sets the tone of the guidelines by drawing attention to the exciting and awesome breakthroughs in science being witnessed and the sense of urgency to address critical issues such as biotechnology. It warns that the ability of scientists and society to handle the forces of change will be crucial to future management of biomedical research and to the possibilities offered to society. As in all frontiers of research, this new knowledge will raise delicate and sometimes difficult issues of human values.

Following the statements of general principles, the guidelines go on to give detailed rules on ethical review procedures, general ethical issues, and specific principles for clinical evaluation of drugs, vaccines, devices, diagnostics and herbal remedies. Also included are sections on human genetics research, transplantation, use of foetal tissue, and assisted reproductive technologies.

Ethical Guidelines for Biomedical Research on Human Subjects is available from: Indian Council of Medical Research, Vigan Bhawan Annexe, Maulana Azad Road, New Delhi 110011, India.