

Discussion lists: the world has become a whole lot smaller!

John Eyers reviews some of the email groups that are now able to connect health workers across the globe



What are they?

Discussion lists (sometimes called email lists or list-servs) are email-based forums that enable large groups of people from all over the world to get together online to discuss topics of mutual interest. Discussions can be initiated with questions and answers received through email. There are thousands of health lists with many devoted to clinical specialties, with some concentrating on health issues in the developing world. Most good lists will have a moderator who will ensure that topics discussed do not stray too far from the list's stated objectives. For clinicians and other health personnel who work in rural areas with limited contact with other professional colleagues, subscribing to one or more discussion lists can make a big difference to alleviating a sense of isolation. Discussion lists can provide that support in answering difficult clinical questions and offering suggestions from other fellow members of the list in similar positions around the world. Often discussion lists will post useful full-text articles, the latest clinical updates, and even jobs!

How do they work?

Before deciding whether to subscribe to a list, it's a good idea to look through the list of archived messages posted in recent months on the list web site; this will tell you what is discussed, and how many messages you will get from month to month – some lists are extremely active, others less so. Most lists are semi-automated, unless there is direct intervention from the moderator in approving each message to the list. To join or subscribe – they are usually free – all you need to do is to send a brief email to the discussion list and you will be added to the list of members who will receive all messages posted to the list. Instructions are given on the discussion list web site as to how to do this. Once you have joined, you will receive in your email inbox every message sent by list members; you are of course free to reply to messages if you choose, pose your own questions, and contribute opinions. At any time, you can 'unsubscribe' from the list either permanently or temporarily.

As a member of HIFA2015 (<http://www.hifa2015.org/>), John Eyers believes one of the biggest challenges for improved health in less-developed countries is ensuring that equal access to appropriate and evidence-based health information is made available to all. John would be delighted to receive comments and suggestions for future articles. Email him on: johneyers@hotmail.com.

Some useful health discussion lists for Africa

Afro-nets (<http://www.afronets.org>)

One of the most active health discussion lists and established in 1997 to facilitate exchange of information among different networks active in Health Research for Development in Anglophone Africa. Discussion topics include HIV/AIDS, announcement of meetings, training courses and funding opportunities, evaluation and dissemination of research results.

HIFA2015 (<http://www.hifa2015.org>)

Health Information for All by 2015 is a highly successful list with 3000 members worldwide from 150 countries. Its email forum's primary focus is on the information and learning needs of healthcare providers in developing countries, especially where the needs are greatest: households and communities, primary health workers, and health professionals working in small district hospitals. Each month much highly relevant health information is posted for health professionals in the developing world. The web site also contains a useful knowledge base and a list of publications.

CHILD2015 (www.dgroups.org/groups/child2015)

This is designed to stimulate debate and propose practical solutions for improving child healthcare worldwide. The focus is on the information and learning needs of healthcare providers at the local level: households and communities; primary health workers; and health professionals working in district hospital facilities.

List of discussion lists

JISCMail

<http://www.jiscmail.ac.uk>

Essential Health Links

<http://www.healthnet.org/essential-links/email-lists>

Satellite Lists

<http://www.healthnet.org/discussion>

Appeal to readers!

If you are a member of a discussion list not listed above that you think other readers would be interested in joining, please let me know.

Email johneyers@hotmail.com and in time, this, and other useful resources will be placed on the Africa Health web site for all to access.