

Accessing health information

John Eyres, veteran librarian, kicks off a new series on accessing knowledge

This is the first of what is hoped will be a regular series of articles on health information and how to access it. I have found that, having spent many years in Africa and elsewhere teaching information skills, many barriers exist which prevent doctors, nurses, and other health workers from accessing appropriate and reliable information that can be put into practice. Such barriers can be a simple lack of up-to-date books and journals in the local health library – if there is one. Without printed information, most practitioners will turn to online information via the Internet, but again, access (if it's available) will often be slow, unreliable, and expensive. But one of the greatest barriers is lack of training in how to find appropriate information whether it's using a medical database, how to find an online medical journal and read it free in full-text, or in navigating the Internet.

I hope that these common information problems will be addressed in the articles to come and I shall also try to identify useful sources of information, whether websites, medical databases, printed material, or organisations. The emphasis, above all, will be on free material that is up-to-date, evidence-based, and appropriate to healthcare in Africa. I shall, however, need you to let me know in which areas of health information you most need help (email johneys@hotmail.com). If I receive an avalanche of suggestions (!), I shall prioritise them and let you know which areas are considered by readers as being of most importance.

I shall end this first piece by listing three important sources of health information – Hinari, TALC, and Essential Health Links.

1. **HINARI** (<http://www.who.int/hinari/>)

The HINARI Programme, set up by the World Health Organization (WHO), together with major publishers, enables developing countries to gain access to one of the world's largest collections of biomedical and health literature. Over 6400 full-text journal titles (very few Western medical libraries will have access to this number of online journals!) are now available to health institutions in 108 countries, areas, and territories. Most African countries have free access to HINARI through national universities, medical and nursing schools, ministries and research institutes – the institutional library will usually hold the username and password for access. If your institution is not registered to use HINARI, you can apply online via the HINARI website.

In addition to full-text journals, HINARI offers access to other full-text information, such as formularies and pharmacopoeias, textbooks, evidence-based medicine guidelines. Included are databases such as the Cochrane Library (for EBM), CINAHL for nursing, WHO Reproductive Health, and the WHO Regional Index Medicus series, including African Index Medicus containing references to African biomedical journals. There are training materials available in how to use HINARI effectively.

This initiative is one of the most important developments in recent years that attempts to address 'information poverty' in the developing world.

2. **Essential Health Links** (<http://www.healthnet.org/essential-links>). This resource provides more than 700 useful websites, validated for quality and reliability, for health professionals, medical library communities, publishers, and NGOs in developing and emerging countries. It is organised into three sections:

- *General Health Resources*, including databases, email lists, full-text books and journals, organisations, image collections, gateways to Africa, Asia, etc.
- *Library and Publishing Support* – internet skills, library support, publishing skills.
- *Specific Health Resources*, including anaesthetics, cardiovascular diseases, emergency medicine, paediatrics, HIV/AIDS, reproductive health, surgery and orthopaedics, tropical medicine and infectious diseases, and other specialties.

3. **TALC** (<http://www.talcuk.org>). I cannot finish this article without mentioning TALC and its inspiring founder David Morley who recently died at the age of 86. TALC (Teaching Aids at Low Cost) was founded in 1965 by Professor David Morley CBE, MD, FRCP when he was lecturer at the Institute of Child Health, London in response to many requests from overseas students for teaching equipment to use in their own countries.

TALC still provides low-cost books, videos, and slide sets, but of particular interest to those who have a basic computer but do not have access to the Internet, TALC makes available free CD-ROMS with a wide variety of full-text information in all medical and nursing specialties. Ten CDs have been produced so far and can be requested via the website or by writing to: TALC, PO Box 49, St Albans, Herts, AL1 5TX, UK (Fax: +44 (0) 1727 846852; Email: info@talcuk.org).



John Eyres has retired from full-time employment as a medical librarian. He worked for 30 years at the London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine and was responsible for teaching information skills to postgraduate students and staff. This included database searching (Pubmed and other databases), how to search the internet in a focused way for evidence-based health information, and advising on literature searching to staff and research students.

In semi-retirement, he now runs health information workshops overseas; countries visited include Malawi, Tanzania, Uganda, Mali, India, and Afghanistan for universities, research institutes, ministries of health, and NGOs.

As a member of HIFA2015 (<http://www.hifa2015.org/>), he 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.