

Do you speak eHealth?

Yunkap Kwankam takes us through the first steps



As a health professional, do you speak eHealth? If not, you definitely need to learn it. But what is eHealth? The formal literature gives more than 50 definitions. What unites these definitions, though, is the fact that they all call for improving health, and the use of information and communication technologies. So, a working definition used by the World Health Organization is 'Information and communication technologies for health'.

In 2005, the 58th session of the World Health Assembly, the annual meeting of health ministers and other health policy and decision makers, resolved that countries should take advantage of the ICT (information and communication technologies) revolution to strengthen their health systems and improve their health services. All countries saw ICT as key to addressing a number of their health challenges, through application areas such as:

- Telemedicine – providing health services at a distance;
- Electronic Health records – chronicling the health of individuals from conception to death;
- Decision support systems for diagnosis and case management;
- ePrescriptions systems – intelligent systems which can guide clinicians in the prescribing, thus avoiding medical prescription and dispensing errors, and a host of other.

They called upon WHO to undertake a set of complementary actions to support countries in their effort to harness the power of ICT for health. WHO and other key players in the eHealth field have programmes and projects to this end. One of the best know of these, in Africa, is the HINARI programme www.who.int/hinari/en, through which institutions in the health sector of certain low- and middle-income countries are given access to online versions of around 4000 of the top journals in the biomedical science – absolutely free (in the case of most African countries). To help you keep in touch with what is happening, you definitely should subscribe to the eHealth Intelligence Report www.lwho.int/goe/ehir (put out by the eHealth Unit in WHO Headquarters in Geneva every fortnight).

In future issues, this column will be a lively discussion on things out there, or things that are on the horizon, along with some contact information on where to follow up for further details on the ideas raised. We

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shall discuss topics of interest such as:

- Health information on the Internet – what sites can you count on for high quality reliable health information?
- The health workforce crisis in Africa, and how some countries are using eLearning to tackle the challenges of producing and retaining health workers in sufficient numbers to meet the dire needs of their health services.
- The excitement about mHealth – the prospects of empowering both health professionals and lay persons with health information and other services, wherever they may and whenever the need arises through hand-held electronic devices such as smart phones which integrate computing, telecommunications and media applications.

So, pick up a copy of the next issues of the *Africa Health Journal* and find out more about how you can bring ICT to bear positively on the challenges you encounter in your daily work, and how interventions at the system level can strengthen your health system. It seems quite clear to me. We need to unleash the power of ICT in our health services if we are to stand a chance of meeting the health Millennium Development Goals.

• *The Editor writes:* By way of further background, the writer of this column is CEO of Global eHealth Consultants, a Swiss consulting firm based in Geneva. In this capacity, his work has focused on eHealth policy and strategy development. Prof. S Yunkap Kwankam is also Executive Director of the International Society for Telemedicine and eHealth (ISfTeH), a federation of national professional societies in the eHealth space, with a presence in nearly 50 countries around the globe.

From 2004 until August 2008, when he retired, he was Coordinator eHealth, at the World Health Organization Headquarters in Geneva, with responsibility for overall coordination of eHealth work across the Organisation. He started several initiatives including: the ePORTUGUESe, Sharing eHealth Intellectual Property for Development (SHIPD), the Africa Health Infoway, the eHealth Intelligence Report (eHIR), and was the Executive Head of the Global Observatory for eHealth. Before joining WHO in 2001, he was Professor and Director, of the Center for Health Technology, University of Yaounde I, Cameroon.

We look forward to learning the ropes on eHealth and mHealth (mobiles), always remembering that we will never forget pHealth (good old paper!)