

'HIF-net at WHO' 18-month report, February 2002

Working together to improve access to reliable, relevant information for healthcare workers and health professionals in developing and transitional countries

'HIF-net at WHO' is an email discussion list dedicated to issues of health information access in resource-poor settings. It was launched in July 2000 as a joint initiative between INASP-Health/Health Information Forum and WHO. The list promotes cross-sectoral, worldwide communication among providers and users of health information: health professionals, librarians, publishers, NGOs, IT professionals, and international agencies.

INASP-Health

Since 1996 the INASP-Health programme has provided a range of complementary services to enhance the impact and effectiveness of health information activities worldwide, through better cross-sectoral cooperation, analysis, and advocacy among all those with an interest in improving access to health information. Services include an advisory and referral service, and the *INASP-Health Directory* - a reference and networking tool for organizations working to increase the availability of appropriate, reliable, low-cost information in developing and transitional countries. INASP-Health does not itself act as a 'health information provider'.

INASP-Health is a programme within the International Network for the Availability of Scientific Publications (INASP), itself a nongovernmental organization under the aegis of the International Council for Science (ICSU).

Health Information Forum

The Health Information Forum was launched by INASP-Health in March 1998 in response to increasing demands for a neutral focal point for sharing of ideas and information among individuals and organizations working to improve access to health information. As suggested by its name, the Health Information Forum is a meeting-place, a space for regular dialogue, a communication tool. Thanks to provision of facilities from the British Medical Association, participation is free of charge and open to all, North and South.

In late 1999, INASP-Health held discussions with WHO to explore ways to support cooperation among organizations working to improve access to information for health professionals in developing and emerging countries. This resulted in the formation of the 'WHO-HIF Cooperation Group'.

WHO-HIF Cooperation Group

The objectives of the Group were:

- to review current activities, priorities, gaps, and relative strengths of WHO and other health information organizations in meeting the information needs of healthcare workers in developing and transitional countries;
- to identify areas in the information activities of WHO and other health information organizations where there may be opportunities for partnership.

The underlying aim is to improve access to *clear, locally relevant, and reliable* health information for healthcare workers in developing and transitional countries.

The Group identified six 'priority areas for action' [ref1]:

1. *Strengthen the local production, translation, adaptation, and dissemination process in resource-poor countries*
2. *Strengthen library and information services in resource-poor countries*
3. *Facilitate global sharing of experience and lessons learned*
4. *Improve access to information about existing materials*
5. *Maximize the impact of information technology*
6. *Develop an enabling environment for health information activities*

Meanwhile, annual reviews of the Health Information Forum in June 1999 and June 2000 indicated that it was vital to encourage further participation from developing countries and countries in transition, either through physical meetings and/or through the use of ICTs.

'HIF-net at WHO' is a practical outcome of the above priorities and demands. It was expected that the discussion list might:

1. Help serve the communication and networking needs of those worldwide with an interest in improving access to relevant, reliable information for health professionals in developing and transitional countries.
2. Serve as a global mechanism for cross-sectoral communication, sharing of experience and exchange of lessons learned.
3. Facilitate policy input from those working in developing countries - healthcare providers, librarians, publishers, and others.
4. Promote better understanding of the priorities and needs of those working in developing countries.
5. Help raise awareness of 'access to health information' as a development issue
6. Provide information about new products, publications, events, training opportunities, and services.
7. Serve as a sounding board for the development of new ideas and innovations.
8. Provide a catalyst for new collaborations and partnerships.
9. Provide a mechanism for demand-led distribution of free or low-cost materials
10. Provide a means for those working in developing countries to request assistance in meeting their information needs.
11. Provide a means for distribution of INASP-Health/Health Information Forum notices and reports.

Participants

As at 9 January 2002, the list had 594 subscribers, compared with 324 on 9 January 2001. There is an increasing proportion of participants from Africa and South Asia.

Classification of participants

| Geography | 9 January 2001 | 9 January 2002 |
|-----------------------------|-----------------------|-----------------------|
| UK | 29% | 27% |
| Sub-Saharan Africa | 19% | 22% (131) |
| US/Canada | 16% | 15% |
| Europe (non-UK) | 14% | 15% |
| South Asia | 7% | 11% (64) |
| Eastern Mediterranean | 1% | 2% |
| Western Pacific/Australasia | 5% | 3% |
| Unknown | 3% | 2% |
| Latin America/Caribbean | 2% | 4% |
| NIS | 1% | <1% |

Professional background

- UK: NGOs, health professionals, medical librarians, publishers, international agencies, academics
- Africa: healthcare providers, medical librarians, teaching staff, international agencies, local NGOs, regional NGOs, MoHs, researchers, list moderators (relative lack of WHO national representatives, commercial publishers, academic journal publishers)
- US/Canada: academics, NGOs, publishers, international agencies, hospitals, medical librarians, health professionals, universities
- Europe (non-UK): WHO HQ, international NGOs, academics, commercial publishers (relative lack of WHO national representatives, medical librarians)
- South Asia: health professionals, academic institutions, NGOs, medical librarians, list moderators (relative lack of medical librarians, publishers)
- Eastern Mediterranean: researchers, WHO offices
- Western Pacific/Australasia: health professionals, NGOs
- Latin America/Caribbean: health professionals (relative lack of medical librarians, publishers)
- NIS: academic, NGOs

WHO participation [figures in square brackets indicate Jan 2001 figures]

WHO HQ: 34 [14]

WHO regional offices: AFRO 2 [3], EMRO 1 [1], PAHO [1] 2

WHO national offices: Argentina 1 [0], Burkina Faso 1 [1], Cuba 1 [0], Dominican Republic 1 [0], Ghana 1 [0], Jamaica 1 [0], Jordan 1 [1], Macedonia 1 [1], Peru 1 [1]

Unsubscribed

Since July 2000, a total of 8 participants have been unsubscribed by the moderator due to persistent failure of email delivery [2 at Jan 2001]

Since July 2000, a total of 53 participants have unsubscribed [7 at Jan 2001]. Five due to change of job, 4 due to other causes ('can get info from colleagues', deceased, 'too many messages', and extended travel), rest unknown.

Participant profiles

When preparing the ground for 'HIF-net at WHO', it was noted that messages on other discussion lists are often frustrating because one may know nothing about where the sender 'is coming from'. We therefore made a policy of asking all subscribers to provide basic information - name, affiliation, professional interests, from which a participant profile (a short paragraph) is derived and appended to any message the subscriber sends to the list.

Update: The Participant Profiles have proved popular to users of the list. **We now have brief profiles for everybody on the list. A challenge for the future is to explore ways to make at least part of this data available in some way. This would require further permission from the individuals concerned, on a person-by-person basis.**

Messages and classification

During 2001, there were 378 messages, making a total of 571 messages since launch.

Type of message

| | |
|---|-----|
| Discussion/Debate | 116 |
| Info on projects, publications and services | 83 |
| Offers of free/low-cost materials | 36 |
| Requests for advice/info | 30 |
| Events | 28 |
| Tributes to Chris Coyer | 21 |
| HIF events and reports | 20 |
| Requests/Offer for partnerships | 17 |
| Requests for free/low-cost materials | 9 |
| Training opportunities | 6 |
| HIF-net summaries/survey results | 4 |
| HIF-net administration | 3 |
| Miscellaneous | 3 |
| Guidance on fundraising | 2 |

Threads with six or more contributions

| | |
|--|----|
| Access to electronic journals | 12 |
| Books at reduced prices | 6 |
| CD-ROMs: New paint on old problems? | 8 |
| Chris Coyer | 21 |
| Distribution of printed materials | 6 |
| Free access to journals of BMJ Group | 6 |
| Global Alliance for Health Information | 6 |
| Hand held computers | 6 |
| Health InterNetwork | 6 |
| Interactive Health Network | 7 |
| Journal donations | 10 |
| Local HIFs | 7 |
| Need for textbooks? | 11 |
| New York Times | 6 |

Geographical origin of messages

| | |
|--------------------------------|-----|
| UK | 146 |
| US/Canada | 51 |
| Sub-Saharan Africa | 53 |
| South Asia | 33 |
| Europe (non-UK) | 28 |
| Eastern Mediterranean | 8 |
| Latin America/Caribbean | 7 |
| Newly Independent States | 5 |
| Western Pacific/Australasia | 5 |
| Forwarded from other listservs | 28 |
| Moderator (NPW) | 14 |

The above statistics indicate that subscribers from developing countries are relatively less likely to send messages to 'HIF-net at WHO' than subscribers from developed countries. This tendency has been previously reported by other email discussion lists, and could be due to a variety of factors. **A challenge for the future is to increase not only the proportion of subscribers, but also the proportion of submissions from the developing world.**

Editorial panel: 12 volunteers have been recruited for an international editorial panel, responsible for summarizing threads. To date, five summaries have been prepared and distributed on 'HIF-net at WHO'.

'HIF-net at WHO' participants have also contributed by email to the following HIF meetings:

- *'Distribution of Physical Materials'*, including presentations from Book Aid International and BMA International Fund

- *'Open Forum'*, including presentations by Andrew Chetley (Exchange), Maria Musoke (Makerere University), Nance M'Jamtu-Sie (University of Freetown, Sierra Leone), and Darlena David (Christian Medical Association, India)
- *'Improving access to international commercial publications'*, including presentations by Richard Stileman (Arnold Publishers), Carol Priestley (INASP), and Nancy Gerry (Blackwell Publishers).
- *'Health InterNetwork'* with Joan Dzenowagis (project manager, HIN) and Helga Patrikios (University of Zimbabwe)
- *'Essential Information'* with Chris Zielinski (Information Waystations and Staging Posts Network), Charles Clift (DfID), Jan Velterop (BioMed Central)
- *'Strengthening biomedical publishers in developing countries: the role of international commercial and non-profit publishers'* with James Falaiye (managing editor of *African Journal of Reproductive Health*), Ian Bannerman (Blackwell Publishers), and Elizabeth Dodsworth (CABI)

'HIF-net at WHO' has become established as a valuable tool of the INASP-Health Advisory and Liaison service. There have been more enquiries than ever before and many of the communications can be fielded to HIF-net at WHO, which has the advantage not only of more 'heads', but of encouraging further discussion, debate and exchange of experience.

The following spontaneous feedback has been received from HIF-net at WHO participants during 2001:

"I have found the "HIF-net at WHO" so useful. I am building up quite a networking system. It is a wonderful way of communicating with colleagues with similar programmes in Africa." David Tibbutt, *Continuing Medical Education Uganda*

"I've found the HIF-net at WHO discussion group excellent, very informative." Emma Farrow, VSO Librarian, Kandy Hospital, Sri Lanka

'I have learnt so much just listening to the views put forward on this forum.' Ahmad Risk, Health Informatics Europe

Some possibilities for the future:

- Web-based archive system (users can currently order monthly batch files by email, but there is no organized archive to browse and retrieve past messages). This feature is reportedly due to be installed in the WHO server software within the next several weeks.
- Explore potential for focused discussion and consultation – for example, during February 2002, INASP-Health is working with the International Institute for Communication and Development, Netherlands, to conduct a consultation on 'HIF-net at WHO' around issues relating to 'strengthening the creation and adaptation of local content'.
- Explore whether and how information contained in Participant Profiles might be used to improve access to information for health workers in developing countries.
- Continue to attract subscribers and contributions from developing countries
- Identify ways to attract subscribers from transitional countries
- Identify ways to attract subscribers from WHO regional and national offices.

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... and all 'HIF-net at WHO' participants

'HIF Organizing Group' (†) and 'WHO-HIF Cooperation Group' (‡)

Report prepared by:

Dr Neil Pakenham-Walsh
Programme Manager, INASP-Health
International Network for the Availability of Scientific Publications
PO Box 516, Oxford OX1 1WG, UK
Tel: +44 (0)1865 248124
Fax: +44 (0)1865 251060

health@inasp.info <http://www.inasp.info>

INASP-Health is a cooperative network for organizations and individuals working to improve access to reliable, relevant information for health professionals in developing and transitional countries. Services include: Advisory and Referral Service; Health Information Forum; 'HIF-net at WHO' email discussion list; INASP-Health Directory; and INASP Newsletter. Participation is free of charge and without obligation.

Update 2007:
For further information, contact INASP
56 St Aldates, Oxford, OX1 1ST, UK

inasp@inasp.info