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Editorials

Meeting the information needs of health workers in developing countries

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A new programme to coordinate and advise

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Health workers in the developing world are starved of the information that is the lifeblood of effective health care.^{1 2} As a direct result, their patients suffer and die. In the words of the late James Grant, former executive director of Unicef, “The most urgent task before us is to get medical and health knowledge to those most in need of that knowledge. Of the approximately 50 million people who were dying each year in the late 1980s, fully two thirds could have been saved through the application of that knowledge.”²

Providing access to reliable health information for health workers in developing countries is potentially the single most cost effective and achievable strategy for sustainable improvement in health care. Cost effective because the amounts of money required are negligible compared with those invested in health services. Achievable because providers of health information have the will and commitment to make it happen, and because information technology presents exciting new opportunities to complement conventional methods of dissemination. And sustainable because information access is the sine qua non of the professional development of all health workers—the most vital asset of any healthcare system.

In 1994 and 1995 the *BMJ* hosted international meetings to look for ways to improve the dissemination of health information to, from, and within the developing world.¹ The meetings showed that the overall impact of providing health information would be greatly enhanced by increased coordination, analysis, and funding. A new programme was needed to serve as a point of reference for those who supply and receive information, to build a global picture of their activities and needs, and to argue their case with others. This programme is now being introduced within an existing non-profit organisation, the International Network for the Availability

of Scientific Publications (INASP). Founded in 1991 by the International Council of Scientific Unions, INASP is a cooperative network of providers and recipients of science information, promoting the exchange of quality information (both printed and electronic) between and within the developed and developing world.

The new programme, INASP-Health, serves three main functions. Firstly, it provides a referral and advisory service for information providers and potential recipients. For example, institutions seeking health information can approach INASP directly and be put in touch with the organisations most likely to help. INASP-Health acts as a catalyst for new collaborations and initiatives and will soon be launching a dedicated email discussion list to facilitate cooperation and debate.

Secondly, INASP-Health aims to build a global picture of health information priorities in the developing world and the most appropriate ways of addressing them. It is developing a specialised database of needs assessments, evaluations of cost effectiveness, and other material related to the provision of health information. These data will be made freely available to help with the planning and setting up of new programmes, to provide support for funding applications, and to help develop future strategies.

The third function of INASP-Health is advocacy, both at a specific and a general level. For example, it works with organisations such as the Association for Health Information and Libraries in Africa (AHILA) to promote their needs to a wider audience, negotiating with publishers and others on their behalf. On a wider scale, INASP-Health will work increasingly with international organisations like the World Health Organisation and World Medical Association and with governments and funding agencies to promote the development of cost effective strategies and to strengthen political and financial commitment.

INASP-Health aims to ensure that the developing world does not get left behind by the information revolution. Rather, it wants to harness the enormous potential to provide the developing world with the information that for too long it has lacked.

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