

Letter to the Editor

Sir,

Disease prevention is the backbone of public health. This applies globally, but is especially the best choice for resource-constrained countries where prevention is not only the cost-effective choice but in many cases is the only choice.

One of the main pillars of disease prevention, management and treatment is information exchange. Public health intervention, such as educating people about ways to improve their diet, usually requires information to be provided to both the public and professionals [1]. Information transfer can use many methods that vary in speed, quality and effect. The Internet is the fastest, easiest and most cost-effective method to achieve these goals.

Although the United Nations has estimated that only 5% of people around the world have access to the Internet, this is expected to increase dramatically in the near future. The Internet, which is expected to improve in quality and to eventually use more readily available and cheaper options such as telephones and televisions, can serve as the backbone of other information sharing systems. This will mean more public access to the Internet and to information exchange. One means of information exchange in the fields of global health, prevention, epidemiology and the Internet is the Supercourse at <http://www.pitt.edu/~super1/>.

The Supercourse provides free access to information about global health and disease prevention and is an ever-expanding library of approximately 700 web-based lectures with hyperlinks related to epidemiology, the Internet and global health. It has a faculty of 9000 scientists from 120 coun-

tries. Of these, 30% of faculty and 15% of lectures are from developing countries.

Characteristics that make the Supercourse unique include: the sharing of lectures that primarily target instructors, free global access, quality control of lectures and the availability of lectures in low bandwidths (small size of lectures). The last feature makes browsing and downloading slides from the lectures easy [2]. To increase accessibility of the Supercourse in areas with limited connectivity, the course is mirrored on 30 sites on 5 continents to increase the speed of data transfer and reduce downloading time [3]. In addition, we have distributed for free in over 100 countries more than 5000 compact discs containing 500 Supercourse lectures. These have been recopied and are now reaching more than 15 000 people. The Supercourse CD is *Copyleft*, meaning that it can be copied and distributed freely with no copyrights. It can be easily installed in computers and takes about 100 Mb of space. One disc can be used to install the Supercourse to an unlimited number of computers.

With the increasing number of lectures posted in the Supercourse on different topics, some specialized supercourses have developed in addition to the main Supercourse. Among those are: the Rehabilitation Supercourse, the Behavioural Science Supercourse, the Islamic Supercourse and the Former Soviet Union (FSU) Supercourse.

Providing appropriate health promotion and disease prevention information is of utmost importance. Free, unlimited information exchange among scientists, clinicians,

academics and researchers using the information superhighway with its increasing capacity is the way forward. This exchange will not only benefit professionals, but will eventually reach all people.

We are now in the process of developing an Arabic supercourse to reach Arab users by translating Supercourse lectures and providing precise and continuously updated special lectures describing the health situation in Arabic countries. The Islamic Global Health Network and the Islamic Supercourse have already been established and will be linked to this Arabic supercourse. The Islamic Supercourse has already posted 18 lectures and many other lectures are being prepared (visit the IGH-

Net at <http://islamichealth.com> and the Islamic Supercourse at <http://www.supercourse.info>).

Islam puts considerable emphasis on health and provides a wealth of scientifically sound information on different health issues [4]. We are developing a global network of professionals interested in Islam, the Internet and disease prevention. This network is open to all those interested in exploring the wealth of information that religious sources bear on our mental, physical and social health [5].

We urge all scientists and health professionals to join the Supercourse and the Islamic Global Health Network (IGHNet).

References

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