

Editorial

For the discerning searcher.....

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For doctors involved in the welfare of children, searching for information on the many aspects of treating childhood illnesses is a standard day-to-day endeavour. With the explosion in medical advances, a plethora of information is available today in the medical literature. While it is no mean task to keep abreast of the important and recent developments in just a few fields of interest, it is virtually impossible to be alive to the progress and advances made in areas of interest which are strictly not of one's special fields of concern. It is generally a daunting endeavour to try and keep up with the knowledge base that is so relevant to medical research as well as to everyday practice.

A medical literature search before embarking on a research project, writing up a scientific paper or prior to an academic presentation, is an essential component of the preliminary steps towards a successful venture. Till quite recently, such a search involved tedious and painstaking labour in physically perusing the many pages of the Index Medicus. In these volumes, listings are made on either a subject or an author heading. Any scientific paper of any value, once published in a reputed journal, would be listed in the Index Medicus. Following the process of sorting out the relevant papers from the Index Medicus, one has to physically retrieve the original papers from the journals, to finally assess the relevance of the information to the task in hand. Very few medical libraries in the world would be able to provide all the journals that are listed in the Index Medicus to enable one to get hold of the hard copies of the related papers. In point of fact, for a developing country like ours, looking around for such a facility is, very often, an exasperating exercise. Some libraries provide the facility of getting down the relevant papers from other libraries abroad but at some cost in terms of money and time.

This scenario has been transformed to a much less tedious procedure by the information superhighway. The quantum leaps of information technology and electronic transfer of data, particularly over the last decade, has revolutionized accessing the avenues and repositories of information available to the discerning reader and the researcher. A computer based

literature search over the Internet and the World Wide Web has almost completely superseded the necessity to physically retrieve data in print format. Wide band transmissions and a surfeit of search engines over the Internet make a computer literature search a nearly painless experience.

A basic PubMed/Medscape/Medline search on www.medscape.com or www.ncbi.nlm.gov/entrez is the equivalent of a physical search on the Index Medicus. Using its inherent search facility, a refined search on any topic could be undertaken very rapidly. The articles listed also provide a percentage assessment of the relevance to the original search query. Many of the listings provide a down-loadable abstract and some provide full text access. The website is a free-domain locality but will need initial registration which is free of charge. Another useful medical search engine is www.embase.com

Almost all the reputed journals have their own websites. Getting to them directly is a real advantage. For instance, The British Medical Journal could be accessed at www.bmj.com and the Archives of Diseases in Childhood at www.archdischild.com. These individual sites provide search facilities of their own and are very helpful in sorting out a search query. All the hard copies of journals provide details of their individual web-sites if they are already in the electronic format. Some of these journals require payments to be made prior to allowing electronic access but many of them provide free access to doctors from developing countries. The latest addition to the medical literature is the advent of electronic journals or e-Journals. They are not available in the printed hard layout and are available only in electronic format. An example is e-Medicine accessible at www.emedicine.com, with its own search facility.

These are days of "evidence based medicine". The best possible and current evaluation of many treatment formats are available at sites like www.update-software.com (The Cochrane library), www.ich.ucl.ac.uk/ebm/ebm.htm, www.clinicalevidence.org, www.pier.shef.ac.uk, www.cche.net/principles/content_all.asp and

www.bestbets.org. These are invaluable in assessing the literature for research as well as for everyday practice.

One could also arrange for e-mail alerts on one's particular interests to be sent regularly. This facility is available through www.docquide.com, which are designed to send refined, summarized details of information with the provision of resources for downloading the original articles. The sites need registration but the service is free of charge.

The Internet is also helpful in providing useful diagnoses for baffling cases. These pre-designed diagnostic databases try to fit in the symptoms, signs and results of investigation, to a series of possible diagnoses. One very useful site is www.isabel.org.uk. In a broad spectrum of cases evaluated, this database was found to show acceptable clinical accuracy¹.

A word of caution though, for the discerning reader. The art of searching the electronic literature has to be mastered through trial and error. Initially, it may appear to be a disheartening task. It would need patience and many hours in front of the screen to be able to conquer the overpowering and intimidating intricacies of the computer. However, once tamed, the dashed thing would be one's slave, forever.

References

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