SYMPOSIUM

The Internet connection
Edited by Rachael K. Anderson

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INTRODUCTION

Reports about the Internet appear with increasing frequency in the general and professional media and attest to the phenomenal explosion in the availability and use of this global web of computer networks. What was formerly a communications medium primarily for those working in educational, research, and military institutions now allows millions of users around the world to exchange information using commonly available technology. In 1993, the White House announced that the Internet would be the starting point for its planned National Information Infrastructure.

This symposium addresses the parallel growth of Internet use in U.S. health sciences libraries. Although some of the Internet’s history and general features are noted, no attempt will be made to provide a comprehensive description or guide to Internet use. Articles and books on these subjects are widely available, and a few general resources are noted in the brief bibliography in the paper by Erhardt-Domino et al. This symposium focuses on use of the Internet to provide health sciences information services and resources and on related technical developments that affect this use.

In the opening article, Corn and Johnson discuss the National Library of Medicine (NLM) program that promotes Internet connectivity for health sciences institutions. Several dozen geographically disparate sites have been funded to date, including Arizona, where, as described by Anderson et al., this project was a catalyst for development of a statewide health information network.

Connecting hospitals in rural and other isolated locations to the Internet entails addressing a range of issues, which Rauch et al. discuss in their article on the Pacific Northwest project funded by NLM through the National Network of Libraries of Medicine (NN/LM). It is worth noting that many of these issues are equally germane to other health care institutions, regardless of their size or geographic setting. A recurrent and significant concern relates to the security of local computer systems, especially clinical data, and their potential vulnerability.

Utah libraries played a major role in building that state’s education network. Peay, Hess, and Sharp examine this collaborative process and the librarians’ contributions to a statewide enterprise that transcends libraries. This is but one illustration of librarians using network development and the introduction of Internet connectivity to assert their positions as information technology leaders in the wider arenas of their institutions and beyond.

Lacroix et al. summarize data from an NLM survey that documents burgeoning Internet access by biomedical libraries. They also review the wide array of resources and services available via the Internet for use by health information professionals. However, the absence of a defined structure for posting these myriad information resources often frustrates even experienced users in their search for changing information. Powsner and Roderer discuss this problem and describe a variety of tools that can be useful in navigating the Internet and in locating available and pertinent resources.

The last article explores future technical capabilities and their probable impact on biomedical libraries as information in digital formats proliferates. Erhardt-Domino et al. assert that the implications for changing libraries and their services are potentially profound and call for early and dynamic planning.

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