Knowledgeshare

Web alert: current awareness updates

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Introduction

In the constant quest to integrate the best possible information into everyday practice within healthcare, time is one of the greatest foes. Certainly critically appraising resources can be one of the most time-consuming elements of the information-seeking process in supporting evidence-based practice, but simply finding the time to interrogate electronic resources can in itself be challenging. There are varying ways to combat this problem and one of these is to get regular updates from web resources where information pertinent to professional need is likely to appear. Many resources now offer this email update facility and the functionality of these systems ranges from a simple monthly bulletin to a user defined search report from multiple evidence-based resources. This article reports on a number of websites currently offering such a facility across a range of information needs.

Current awareness update websites

National Institute for Clinical Excellence (NICE):
www.nice.org.uk

The NICE site offers the chance for users to sign on for email updates and an electronic newsletter. The sign on facility can be found at the bottom of the menu on the left side of the site's homepage. The information supplied via this sign up system falls into two broad categories. The first is news about the structure and functioning of the institute. The second is information about the institute's main output, guidelines and guidance. Signing up to receive the updates and newsletter requires the user to supply an email address and self-selected password.

As part of the sign up process users can select any number of options from a topic list, and the frequency with which they wish to receive information on these topics. This process only applies to the update and not to the newsletter. Updates come in the form of an email with links to new and updated information for each section of the site embedded in the email. It is worth noting that an email system has to be set up to accept live HTML links for this aspect of the service to work.

The sign up process also allows the user to select whether to receive the e-newsletter that covers all NICE topics in a more easily readable format and is produced on a monthly basis. The newsletter is also available to read from the home page menu.

E-guidelines:
www.eguidelines.co.uk

E-guidelines in the main is a primary care-focused journal and web site. General access to the e-guidelines service requires the completion of a registration process. As part of this process the user can select to receive email updates about new information on the site. The major updates to this site occur when a new copy of the e-guidelines journal is published, all issues of which are available online from here. As with the NICE site there is a list of subject areas which allow the user to personalise the information received in the update. These topic areas are arranged into broad medical subject areas, e.g. nutrition, skin, cardiovascular, etc. However, the email updates are organised under headings such as 'updated guideline summaries', 'news' and 'your problems solved'. The nature of the information included in these updates depends upon the selections made by the user at the time of registration. As with most of the systems mentioned within this article the choices made at the time of registration can be changed easily at a later date.

Medscape:
www.medscape.com

Medscape is an American health information system mainly for doctors. Access to the system is via a sign up process that requires the user to give quite

extensive information about professional role and interests. There is a wide variety of information on the system including discussion groups, details of upcoming conferences by medical subject area, Medline search facilities and access to a few selected journals and reference books.

Access to the Medscape update, called Medpulse, is via a small menu on the right of the dark blue title bar under the heading 'welcome' followed by the user's name. Selecting 'my profile' from this menu gives access to four more choices, the last of which is 'e-mail newsletter management'. There is a range of standard medical subject areas any of which the user can select. There are also options for a general weekly update covering major issues across the healthcare spectrum. Nurses, medical students and pharmacists can choose to receive an update concentrated upon their information needs and there are further specialist selections such as one focused on hypertension. The update itself is split up by subject matter, e.g. news, continuing medical education (CME) etc. and is sent out weekly.

Nursing and Midwifery Council (NMC):
www.nmc-uk.org/cms/content/home/home.asp

The NMC site currently offers two email updates for users of the site. The first of these is the email newsletter that is concerned with work and developments within the NMC and its web site. This update includes details of new publications and reports available for purchase through the NMC or accessible from the website. The second update takes the form of a news magazine. This is new in electronic form and features news about healthcare issues related to nursing and midwifery. Unlike other sign up processes featured in this article there is no facility to tailor these updates to meet individual need. At the time of writing the sign up process for these two email updates was accompanied by a questionnaire that allows users to give feedback on the update process and how they think it could be improved.

Cochrane Collaboration Consumer Network:
www.cochraneconsumer.com/

The Cochrane Consumer Network is an information site for patients and members of the public. The site does not have the breadth of subject matter found in many other patient information resources, instead it focuses on helping users understand health research, supplying summaries of Cochrane systematic reviews

and encouraging public involvement in the Cochrane research process. The Consumer Network attempts to package the information normally available to healthcare professionals, through the Cochrane Library, in a format that is accessible to the lay person.

Access to the Consumer Network email update requires the user to supply an email address and to make a selection from two pre-set menus. The update can be personalised to contain up to six different categories of information and any of the topics listed, each of which is a different general area of healthcare concern. The site has a newsletter posted on it every month and notification of this posting can make up part of the email alert.

Health Net UK:
www.healthnetuk.com/pages/index.htm

Health Net UK is a patient-focused site that is connected to the e-guidelines site for healthcare professionals. The site has four main information groupings:

- news – about health news in the UK
- how was it for you – patients' opportunity to share experiences
- about my condition – information relating to medical conditions
- self-help – links to and details about patient support groups.

The email update facility for this site is accessible directly from the home page. Sign up for the facility requires the user to supply a high level of personal information including home address and telephone number. It is worth noting that there appears to be no personal information use policy on the site with regard to how personal details will be stored and if they will be passed on to third parties. The Data Protection Act (DPA) basically states that personal information given to organisations cannot be used for any purpose other than that stated at the time of collection. The fact that this information is gathered as part of an update sign up service creates a tacit statement of use which means that the information should not be passed on to any third party. However, it is considered good practice to include such a statement and as the sign up form is actually administered by a third party organisation it would seem important to make clear the security of user information.

Once the personal details have been filled in the user can select areas of health-related interest from a pre-set list. Unusually, this site also allows the user to add extra terms to the email update via a free type

text box at the bottom of the form. The update is categorised under the major headings mentioned above.

Health Technologies Assessment (HTA) database:
agatha.york.ac.uk/htahp.htm
Database of Abstracts of Reviews of Effectiveness (DARE):
agatha.york.ac.uk/darehp.htm
NHS Economic Evaluation Database (NHS EED):
agatha.york.ac.uk/nhsdhp.htm

These three resources have been grouped as they are hosted and maintained by the same organisation, the NHS Centre for Reviews and Dissemination at the University of York. The sign up for these services is simple, requiring the user to supply an email address, a name and a postal address. The user receives a regular email update about the new records that are added to the databases. There are no facilities to personalise the service but as each database has its own focus this presents no problems. This is a good example of a simple service adding value to a database system.

The TRIP database:
www.tripdatabase.com/index.cfm

The TRIP database searches across a wide range of evidence-based resources that are grouped together under the following headings:

- evidence-based direct links
- query-answering services
- peer-reviewed journal
- guidelines
- e-textbooks and medical images.

The site also features an experimental link to the clinical queries search facility on the PubMed version of Medline. If this link is followed, the query entered into the TRIP database is replicated within this PubMed search facility and all the results of the search are made available to the user in a separate browser window.

The TRIP database system regularly checks across a wide range of resources that offer full text access or full references to quality healthcare information. The system then 'captures' the reference or document and includes a record of it on the database. This ensures that the database offers as wide a range of information as possible through this single portal.

The email update available through this system is unique in that it allows the user to pre-define terms

that are then used to perform a monthly search of all the new titles that have been added to the database within that month. The results of the search for that month are then emailed to the user. The sign up for this service is accessed via the home page but the link can be a little difficult to find. There is a thin grey bar that runs across the page just below the title and the main menu. There are two links on this bar in quite small writing. The link on the left is the sign up for the update service and the link on the right is to alter the update information after registration. The update itself is organised into the main groupings listed above.

British Library – Zetoc:
zetoc.mimas.ac.uk/

The Zetoc database gives access to the British Library's electronic database of journal contents pages and conference proceedings. The database annually indexes the contents pages of over twenty thousand journals and sixteen thousand conference papers. The subject coverage for the database is general; i.e. it is not health-specific but does include healthcare journals.

The update facility for Zetoc allows users to choose to receive the contents pages of any of the journals held on the system or to set keywords that search for articles across new editions on the database at regular intervals. Email updates are sent out on the day that the appropriate record is entered onto the system. Access to the update system is via an Athens password; if a user does not have an Athens password one can be obtained by registering on the National electronic Library for Health (www.nelh.nhs.uk) from any NHSnet-linked machine. Setting the user preferences for the update is quite a complex process that is well explained on the site itself.

Conclusion

The steady integration of evidence-based principles into healthcare practice is creating a working environment where ease of access to information is of greater importance. A growing awareness of this need amongst organisations supplying information is leading to a number of innovations in information supply not least of which is email updates. The number of organisations offering this service is going to expand over time as the concepts of supplying information to the point of need and placing the onus of responsibility on the organisation rather than the individual become the status quo. This would seem an ideal time for the individual to explore these

systems and integrate their use into practice as a way of maximising the use of scarce information-seeking time.

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