

GOING ELECTRONIC?

The Health and Development Resources CD-ROM - Teaching aids at Low Cost (TALC). 1st Edition, June 2002
Review by Tim Hughes, Consultant Anaesthetist, Doncaster, UK

TALC is a UK based charity that has provided healthcare related educational material to developing countries since 1965. This CD-ROM is an early result of a project supported by the UK Government's Department for International Development. Their objectives are to:

- produce easy to use, interactive and copyright-free CD-ROMs
- provide a low cost method for distributing health care information and sharing ideas between developed and developing countries.
- educate users about web technology in anticipation of increasing future Internet access possibilities.

Ever since getting tangled up in a 'Hula-Hoop' as a child, I have been deeply suspicious of colourful round things with holes in the middle; particularly when they are claimed to be easy to use! I am therefore perhaps the appropriate type of character to explore and review this CD-ROM. A natural or knowledgeable computer user I am not; tending to be somewhat of a dinosaur when it comes to the idea of replacing printed paper with shiny discs, despite our increasing professional reliance on the electronic medium in recent years. Fair enough; there is an inevitable reduction in bulk, storage management effort, and distribution costs. But this is balanced by the need for a working "white box" (computer plus CD-ROM drive) with appropriate software, a predictable source of electrical power and, if dependent on the Internet, a reliable phone link. Such resources are still not readily available in many countries.

Starting up is a straightforward matter of following some clear instructions, which include the opportunity to download Acrobat Reader to take advantage of both HTML and PDF formats. The CD is organised into contributor 'sections' that are linked through an integral ISYS search engine. This feature is simple to download and use, as long as you are working with a Windows (95 or later) operating system. Some of the 14 contributors in this edition have taken advantage of the electronic format potential better than others, and I can't understand why only the World Anaesthesia section appears to offer downloadable web browser software. Future editions might make this available with initial loading of the disc.

Even I have to confess that "browsing" this electronic resource has been fun; a feeling that doesn't always come immediately to the surface when one describes handling a medical journal or textbook! The contents include a wide-ranging selection of healthcare information but inevitably I began by navigating my way through some anaesthetic topics.

A simple search for material on *morphine* (which I should know well) and *ketamine* (with which I have significantly less personal experience) sent me on a journey through reviews from the complete collection of *Update in Anaesthesia*; via a *Reference*

Material collection of tutorials and international journal review articles developed by the WSFA and World Anaesthesia; to editions of the *Uganda Continuing Medical Education Newsletter*; visiting evidenced based review abstracts from the *Cochrane Library* on the way; and finally surfacing inside the *Primary Trauma Care Manual*. As the length of the preceding sentence indicates, this was a journey through a veritable maze of information that left me yearning for a slightly more selective searching tool.

Exploring more general health issues such as current thoughts on the prevention of malaria or HIV in the developing world brought further components into play. Notable amongst these is a full copy of UNICEF's "Facts of Life" document on child health, and the *Community Eye Health* teaching material which includes an interesting slide collection.

If I had chosen to take advantage of the many offered Internet links and wandered off into the 'electronic ether', then I would have found many familiar and not so familiar additional delights. In fact some contributors currently rely perhaps too heavily on their web links. However, those users without the essential phone lines for such indulgences can console themselves with the self-sufficiency that many sections of this package represent.

While I found this resource generally well organised, contributors were variable in the provision of introductory guidance on how to get the best from their 'sections'; with World Anaesthesia coming out best in this regard. This first issue is essentially an English language based system, with the exception of the *Primary Trauma Care* 'section' which offers Chinese, French and Indonesian language options. Fortunately I couldn't get the Chinese version to run for me!

Despite the obvious time and effort that has gone into it so far, the project is clearly in its infancy with TALC looking for more partners who will contribute to and help develop the content. I can't help but feel that, for cost advantage if for no other reason, those in developing countries will reconcile themselves to such electronic alternatives to the printed word faster than those in "developed" areas. No doubt, TALC are more than delighted to receive constructive advice on future improvements through the feedback mechanism offered in the introductory pages of all sections. With the resulting continuing development, the stated objectives are more than likely to be achieved; with this CD-ROM becoming a little treasure-trove for health professionals throughout the world.

Get one of your own and try it out. You can't have mine; it's going to a friend in Tanzania when I've made a copy for myself!

Copies can be obtained from:
Unit 13, Oxford Enterprise Centre, Standingford House
Cave Street, Oxford, OX4 1BA, Tel: 01865 791624, E-mail:
info@e-talc.org; Web-site: www.e-talc.org