



PAN AMERICAN HEALTH ORGANIZATION /
WORLD HEALTH ORGANIZATION
Washington D.C., USA

VIRTUAL HEALTH LIBRARY - EQUITY, HEALTH AND HUMAN DEVELOPMENT

REPORT:

First SESSION OF THE EXECUTIVE SECRETARY OF THE ADVISORY COMMITTEE

Presenters:

Francisco Lopez (for Jose Maria Paganini), Gladys Faba, Armando de Negri

Moderator: Juan Antonio Casas

Date and Time: June 5, 2001, 7:30 – 10:00 PM

Hotel Las Quintas - Cuernavaca, Mexico

The session was the first one of the Executive Secretary of the Advisory Committee for the VHL Equity-Virtual Health Library, sponsored by the Rockefeller Foundation and the Division of Health and Human Development (HDP) of the Pan American health Organization.

The audience of approximately twenty-five people included Instituto Nacional de Salud and FUNSALUD staff and participants from other institutions like ABRASCO, Convenio Hipolito Unanue, and from different countries - Argentina, Chile, Colombia, Panama, Brazil, Costa Rica, Peru and USA.

Dr. Casas began by presenting his main message regarding the proposal of the conceptual framework, the background documents prepared for the meeting, the problems, priorities for the development of the VHL on Equity in the Region, and some comments about existing and planned networks and databases in the region.

Considering the information needs and the technological infrastructure constraints of the region, he mentioned that participants are expected to consider the possible form of their contribution to the project, propose specific approaches and strategies, and agree on responsibilities for the implementation of the Virtual Library on Equity.

He indicated the intent to develop the content of the VHL - Equity in three stages:

First, by presenting LIS - locators of information in the Regional web site of the VHL-Equity in BIREME, including the identification and classifications of terms used in DECS (Thesaurus).

Second, by the National inputs and developments. Efforts that will be guided and coordinated by the Executive secretary of the VHL Advisory Group to reach the key institutions and individuals interested in participate and collaborate.

Third, by assessing how adequately the major topics currently being put forward are likely to reach their intended beneficiaries.

The presentations provided background information about a conceptual framework for the VHL - Equity, Dr. Lopez discussed an approach. Towards a new human development model from the health sector perspective with a focus on knowledge and information technology. Dr. Faba suggested a classification currently used in Mexico, she argued that because of differences in needs of information within countries it is

important to have a broad range of topics, advocating a much more strenuous effort to focus on reaching different audiences than creating a thematic framework. Dr. De Negri focused his presentation on the policy development process and the theoretical, analytical and conceptual needs on the subject of Equity and Human Development.

A floor discussion followed the presentations. As always, the discussion covered a wide range of topics. The topics attracting the greatest amount of attention included:

The magnitude and importance of information needs differences. One participant questioned whether the conceptual framework was as significant as an open VHL in Equity, and the importance of building a VHL with a multidisciplinary approach.

There was emphasis on the use of common methodologies of the VHL, the decentralization of information and the use of a theoretic framework for the standardization and structure of equity related terminology in the standard vocabulary of the (DeCS – Health Sciences Descriptors) and the quality control of the indexed information.

Demand considerations Several people raised the question of whether the difficulties experienced in reaching the target audiences resulted from deficiencies in the communication and not from the classification. There were suggestions to make a survey regarding the needs of different audiences and to create a real feeling of belonging. A conceptual framework, tree of knowledge, must be constructed with the participation of the key players involved.

The discussion produced a rather clear consensus that demand considerations played an important role, and needed to be taken centrally into account while designing the VHL-Equity strategies.

The global connectivity, feasibility of reaching the target audiences. Another participant asked about the limitation of access because of financial constraints, structural barriers at institutional level, electrical power or telephone connections have been improving but in many cases still limit access. Financial barriers, costs of Internet access vary from country to country and in many cases the services are beyond the reach of some VHL-Equity groups. Educational, political and cultural barriers, different attitudes exist ranging from disinterest to resistance. Despite the exponential spread of the use of Internet there is a great need of more orientation and training. Some pedagogical efforts are necessary to increase the awareness of the utility and importance of the VHL as an advocacy, teaching and research tool. Some participants advocated field experimentation [development of VHL at national level] to produce reliable evidence.

The importance of technical definitions relative to consensus constraints and to use a specific conceptual framework (Equity categories for the VHL). In response to a question on this topic, Elenice de Castro from BIREME opined that consensus constraints are probably paramount, but that there is still room for considerable improvement through technical measures (DeCS Thesaurus). But she stressed that this was only speculation on her part, that the only way to find out is to design more focused web site content; press hard for their implementation; and see how far we can go.

Suggestions for Action

The findings just described, and other findings from the discussions, led the group to make five suggestions for VHL-Equity action:

- First, an increased concern for consensus building around the theoretical and thematic structure of the VHL-Equity. At present the terms used for indexing and navigation, DeCS Vocabulary coordinated by BIREME are a good starting point. Greater attention should be given to designing better ways to provide orientation and training in the technical structure of the VHL-Equity.
- Second, a stronger emphasis on the role of the VHL-Equity as a "content provider" in the provision of data, facts, methodologies, conceptual developments, analytical tools and effective infrastructure for interaction and dialogue among the network participants.
- Third, a determined effort to monitor and evaluate efforts using performance indicators as the main tool for the development and implementation of the VHL-Equity. Carefully chosen monitorable indicators will make it possible to assess whether these objectives of the VHL-Equity and its benefits are in fact being carried-out.
- Fourth, greater attention to the content of electronic products, in formats to relieve information overload and presented in ways they can be accessed and selected on an as-needed basis. Maintain a multilingual web site (English, Spanish, and Portuguese) as much as translation resources permit.
- Fifth, recognition of the need to promote the use of new information technology. Where feasible and appropriate, by demonstrating the relevance and benefits of the VHL-Equity.