Geneva Health Forum, 18th to 21th May 2010

To what extent can e-medicine or tele-diagnosis help people and communities lacking access to proper health care? Do they represent a positive alternative, a danger or an excuse for inaction?

Telemedicine/tele-diagnosis allows health professionals to maximize the latest technologies in order to reach areas where traditionally doctors would have to travel to in order to treat and diagnose patients. Telemedicine also allows for the training of doctors, enabling various discussions and exchange of ideas to take place despite distances, such as the RAFT project. This would mean then that knowledge on health and medical information can spread more quickly. HON, for example, aims to educate "cyber citizens" through its Code of Conduct.

A summary of the one year project conducted in Sub-Saharan African countries on the Assessment of Online Health Information for Arabic Sites:

Since its birth in 1989, the World Wide Web has grown like an inferno, and is now one of the major forms of information sources on every topic conceivable, including and especially, the health domain. In less developed regions, however, there is limited access to computers. The availability of local information in the Internet is therefore limited. We conducted the study "Obtaining Reliable Medical Information Online" in French-speaking Africa, with special emphasis on Mali, to pinpoint the specific socio-cultural factors by which confidence in on-line medical content is built.

Information was gathered from health professionals, and websites of French-speaking Africa were also identified and evaluated. Complementary initiatives were also undertaken to draft recommendations for the compilation and evaluation of on-line medical data that take into account socio-cultural and economic factors. Information drawn up in accordance with those recommendations would then be eligible for inclusion into the Global Health Library project of the World Health Organization and be certified by the Health on the Net Foundation.

From the information, we concluded that locally produced sites are limited due to the absence of a market for online health information. Additionally, few health professionals write material intended for the local market, and that medical specialists were interested in more specialized information produced in Western countries. In terms of access to online medical information, we conclude that information reliability is not perceived as an important factor, with access to the Internet being the principal difficulty. Similarly, the Internet is primarily used for general and anonymous reading -- there is therefore very little importance given to confidentiality. Reliable and free information sources are not well known, and access to online medical information is also dependent on rank in the medical profession where there is a disparity of internet use.

From this study, we recommend that there be support of the production of information for a local audience through increase of local information publication using suitable local human resources and promotion of quality accreditation of sites. We also recommend that there be diffusion of locally produced information onto a more international platform, improvement of access to online information through stressing the importance of quality information, promotion of free online resources, and

facilitation of access to groups identified to have limited or no online access and development of a technical infrastructure.