

December 31, 2006

To: Walter Anderson

From: Lloyd Etheredge

Re: How the UN Can Be a Daily Partner with Health Professionals and Assure the Best and Latest Health Information to Everyone, Worldwide

Proposal:

The United Nations assure that the best and latest health information is available on the Internet, without charge and in usable form, to: 1.) Individual patients/consumers in every country; and 2.) Health professionals who can give "health information prescriptions" to patients, customized to reflect individual needs and local cultures and services.

Background

Searching for reliable and detailed health-related information is one of the most frequent uses of the Internet. The needs are predictable: for example, each month x million women worldwide will become pregnant for the first time; x million people will be diagnosed with specific serious or life threatening conditions; another x million people will begin to cope with chronic health problems.

For-profit Websites have not provided a satisfactory solution to needs for health information. The quality of their information varies, and patients have legitimate concerns about confidentiality and links between the Websites they visit and the sources of the Website's advertising revenue. Thus the US Government's Website at the National Institutes of Health/National Library of Medicine, www.medlineplus.gov, has become the best and most frequently visited medical Website in the world. The information services (available without charge) also are linked to the online Index Medicus databases, which allow patients or physicians to drill down, as far as they wish, into the world's medical literature.

- A recent innovation by the National Library of Medicine (NLM) is to work with medical specialty societies and local medical societies to create the capability for physicians to write "Health Information Prescriptions" customized for each patient and condition. (See the attached example, based on two states where prototypes of the US national system are being refined.) The NLM also codes each page of information separately, so that medical information can be "pulled forward" by local clinics who wish to have it available online at their own Websites. The project provides customized prescription pads to each physician, wall posters for patient waiting rooms that explain the system, and printed material reviewing the system and identifying local sites for free Internet access. Physicians like the "information prescription" option, because it provides additional resources for their patients, the material is well-written by health communication specialists, and the information is reliable and vetted by their professional societies.

Implementation

In principle, it should be easy to extend this system worldwide. However the initiative probably cannot come from the US government itself. Let me make two comments to explain this:

1.) The US government translates the medlineplus.gov site into Spanish, because of the growing Hispanic population in America. However - although the site can be used without charge, from anywhere in the world - the National Library of Medicine does not have the budget to provide translations into other languages. Nor can it provide spoken versions of the material, for patients with limited literacy, or other options for handicapped users.

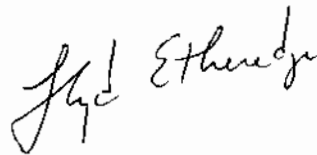
2.) I have been involved in past discussions for the development of the Health Information Prescription plan; and several discussions to extend this plan internationally and for additional foreign language (text and audio) translations (e.g., into Arabic languages, Russian, etc.) as an initiative in US public diplomacy. My strong impression is that Dr. Don Lindberg, the Director of the National Library of Medicine, and his team would love to see

these additional steps and to be helpful.

Thus, I suggest that the Secretary General designate a high-level working group with UN representation, and NGOs/foundations, to evaluate options and develop plans for worldwide access (for everyone, without charge) to the best and latest medical/health information.¹ I think that the next steps are straightforward, and require only relatively modest investments.²

A Political Comment

This is an UN/WHO initiative that can provide visible benefits in the lives of ordinary men and women, in all countries. And make the UN a daily partner with health professionals in every country. Politically, I think that it is a wise step that will increase support for WHO and UN activities.



Dr. Lloyd S. Etheredge

lloyd.etheredge@yale.edu (Email)

(301)-365-5241 (v)

¹ Among American private foundations, the new Google Foundation (www.google.org) recently named Dr. Larry Brilliant, a specialist in international health, to be its first Executive Director; this project could be a natural fit. In the Islamic world, the Aga Khan Development Network (www.akdn.org) has major health initiatives in East Africa, Central Asia, India, and Pakistan and might be another participant/partner who could underwrite part of the costs.

² An advisory group may wish to recommend additional information, for the poorest countries, concerning the potential benefits of home or folk remedies for some conditions. And, also, investments to assure village-level Internet links for health.

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National Institutes of Health
FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE
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National Library of Medicine
Robert Mehnert • Kathy Cravedi
(301) 496-6308 • publicinfo@nlm.nih.gov

"The Health Information Prescription"

**Senator Tom Harkin Joins National Library of Medicine and
American College of Physicians--
American Society of Internal Medicine Foundation
to Launch Patient Information Program**

(Des Moines, IA)--Doctors often prescribe medication after seeing a patient. But what if that doctor also wants to direct the patient to up-to-date, reliable, consumer-friendly information about a health concern? Under a pilot program to be launched in Iowa April 7th, physicians all over the state of Iowa will be able to do just that.

The American College of Physicians- American Society of Internal Medicine Foundation (ACP-ASIM Foundation) has teamed with the National Library of Medicine (NLM), an arm of the National Institutes of Health, to create the "Health Information Prescription" program. Now, doctors throughout Iowa will have customized [prescription pads](#) that they can use to point patients to first-rate online health information in NLM's MEDLINEplus database .www.medlineplus.gov>.

The kickoff will take place at 9:00 a.m., on Monday, April 7th, at the State Library of Iowa in Des Moines. This event will feature remarks by:

- **The Honorable Tom Harkin, United States Senator, State of Iowa;**
- **Michael Kienzle, Practicing Physician and Member, Iowa Chapter of the ACP-ASIM;**
- **Whitney Addington, MD, Chair, ACP-ASIM Foundation;**
- **Donald A.B. Lindberg, MD, Director, NLM;**
- **Mary Wegner, State Librarian, The State Library of Iowa**

In addition, Michael Kienzle, MD, will write Iowa's first information prescription for United States Senator Tom Harkin. Dr. Kienzle will also be on hand after the program to write information prescriptions for members of the press. Refreshments will be served at the program's conclusion.

Why do NLM and ACP-ASIM Foundation consider this project so important?

"Physicians have always known that an informed patient who takes an active role is a 'better' patient," notes NLM Director Lindberg. "We believe that both patients and their doctors will welcome this additional medical tool -- good medical information -- in their continuing efforts to provide good health care. Medical and public libraries will play an important role in the success of the 'Information Rx' project, just as they have with MEDLINEplus itself," he added. "We look forward to working with the members of the National Network of Libraries of Medicine in this project."

With contents culled from the best public and private health sites on the Internet, MEDLINEplus has information on more than 600 health topics. Under each, patients will find nuts-and-bolts information on symptoms, diagnosis and treatment, current news stories, research studies, clinical trials, helpful graphics and even interactive tutorials. There's detailed but easy-to-read information on thousands of over-the-counter and prescription drugs, too. And MEDLINEplus is also available in Spanish.

Why is it important that doctors steer their patients to MEDLINEplus? Can't they just suggest they do a general Internet search?

"Unfortunately, some patients lack the knowledge needed to find good health care information online," commented the ACP- ASIM's Dr. Kienzle. "Also, they might not be able to guard against marketing schemes disguised as websites."

According to recent research, six million Americans go online daily to search for information about health and disease. Additional findings show that nearly 70 percent of patients nationwide would pay serious attention to a website recommended by their physician.

"Used properly, the Internet can be just as helpful a healthcare tool as the biopsy, the x-ray and the electrocardiogram," observed ACP-ASIM Foundation Chair Whitney Addington, M.D. "That is why I hope that our Iowa doctors will embrace the 'Health Information Prescription' program, directing Iowans eager for good consumer health information to the gold standard, MEDLINEplus. I think they'll find," he continued, "That, used in conjunction with their doctor's good care, information is the best medicine."

The National Library of Medicine is part of the National Institutes of Health, an agency of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services.

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MEDLINEplus.gov

THE WEB SITE YOUR DOCTOR PRESCRIBES

A free, comprehensive, authoritative, up-to-date health information web site from the world's largest medical library, the National Library of Medicine of the National Institutes of Health, with the support of the American College of Physicians/American Society of Internal Medicine Foundation.

MICHAEL KIENZLE, MD

Information **Rx**

- ☐ www.medlineplus.gov/cholesterol
- ☐ www.medlineplus.gov/coronarydisease
- ☐ www.medlineplus.gov/highbloodpressure
- ☐ www.medlineplus.gov/alzheimers
- ☐ www.medlineplus.gov/colorectalcancer
- ☐ www.medlineplus.gov/asthma

- ☐ www.medlineplus.gov/diabetes
- ☐ www.medlineplus.gov/osteoporosis
- ☐ www.medlineplus.gov/exercise
- ☐ www.medlineplus.gov/prostatecancer
- ☐ www.medlineplus.gov/breastcancer
- ☐ www.medlineplus.gov/arthritis

☐ www.medlineplus.gov/other: (please specify) _____

☐ www.medlineplus.gov/druginformation _____

☒ Was MEDLINEplus helpful? Tell us at: www.foundation.acponline.org/survey

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