Inform'ACTION *n°30*

Conducting computer-centred courses in POHLN centres

Towards the end of 2008, SPC conducted a 'Computing in Public Health Practice' module as part of its 'Data for Decision Making' (DDM) course in Fiji. The course, which has been presented in several Pacific Island countries, focuses on the skills that public health professionals need at all stages of data management: collection, analysis, interpretation and application to public health action. These obviously include computer skills.

One of the difficulties in conducting such hands-on training is finding appropriate locations that are equipped with workstations, preferably networked, enabling around 20 participants to carry out exercises using a variety of software including EpiInfo and standard office applications (usually MS Office) for spreadsheet calculation, text processing and presentation.

In many countries, learning centres established in the context of WHO's Pacific Open Learning Health Net (POLHN) are the best or sometimes the only facilities for delivering such modules. The centres, which are often within a central health facility, usually consist of a large room equipped with approximately 20 workstations with standardised hard- and software, connected in a local network and to the internet. A network printer and UPS (uninterruptible power supply) are usually also installed. A dedicated administrative and technical support person to look after each centre is very important for their sustained functionality.

POLHN learning centres have been set up and equipped in 16 locations in 11 countries:

- Rarotonga Hospital in Cook Islands,
- National Health Promotion Centre in Tamavua (close to Suva) and at Lautoka Hospital in Fiji,
- Tungaru National Hospital on Tarawa, Kiribati,
- Majuro Hospital and at the Ebeye Community Health Centre in Marshall Islands,
- State Hospitals of Chuuk, Kosrae and Pohnpei, and at the Yap Area Health Education Center in the Federated States of Micronesia
- RON Hospital, Nauru,
- Belau National Hospital, Palau,
- Motootua Hospital in Apia, Samoa,
- School of Nursing & Health Studies, Honiara, Solomon Islands,
- Queen Salote School of Nursing at Vaiola Hospital in Nukualofa, Tonga,
- Port Vila Central Hospital in Vanuatu.

More information about POLHN can be found on the internet at either www.polhn.org or www.polhn.com.

In Fiji, as in other countries, we were fortunate that we could take advantage of the POLHN facilities - not to mention the kind and much appreciated assistance of POHLN staff - for the 'Computing in Public Health Practice' module. We consider that these learning centres

should be used more regularly for computer-related in-country training, although this would require a slight re-thinking of their purpose and design. POHLN centres are intended to act as distance-learning locations. This means that the emphasis is on student interaction with a remote resource (interactive program or 'real' facilitator) rather than on group learning in a classroom-like setting using computers.

To accommodate both purposes, POLHN learning centres would, for instance, benefit from built-in projection facilities that would enable the teacher's screen (or that of any other computer) to be projected on to an easily visible surface, more black- or whiteboards, and good acoustics. In computer-focused courses, it is also important that facilitators can move around the classroom easily, so they can see how the class is coping with an exercise or assist individual participants. Last but not least, running a week-long, all-day course means that the centre is blocked to other students who may be pursuing online lessons. It would be ideal if two or three workstations were available in a separate room so that these students could continue their work while a course was taking place in the main room, without mutual interference.

Achieving all this would require a number of adjustments to existing POHLN centres and add some design challenges to building any new ones. However, we think it would be well worth the additional effort, so that two distinct purposes - distant learning and computer-centred classes - could be served without duplicating infrastructure, i.e. setting up two learning centres in the same geographic area instead of one.

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