

Surveys Reflect Growing Partner Use of Technology

Since its inception in 1996, AIHA's Learning Resource Center (LRC) project has dramatically improved the use of information among health care professionals in CEE and the NIS by providing access to the Internet, on-line and CD-ROM-based medical databases and evidence-based practice resources. Data from two recent surveys evaluating the impact of the LRCs confirm that technology is playing an increasingly critical role in the daily practice of many of AIHA's partners, and is beginning to result in quality improvements at their home institutions.

In January 1998, AIHA conducted a survey to determine how many and what type of partner institution staff members have access to the LRCs, most of which are equipped with just one computer provided by AIHA. The survey defined staff with "access" as those who both know about the existence of the LRC and can go to use the LRC easily when and if they want to.

With 78 out of 94 LRCs reporting, survey results show that currently more than 51,000 CEE/NIS health professionals (out of 90,000 total staff affiliated with AIHA partner institutions) have adequate access to the centers. This includes approximately 9,000 physicians, 13,500 nurses, and 3,500 health care administrators. In addition, each month the LRCs provide access to more than 1,000 health professionals, patients, and public citizens who are not directly affiliated with partnership institutions.

More than ten percent of the 51,000 staff members who use the LRCs have received training and instruction on how to use the Internet and other computer-based resources. In addition, nearly 10,000 staff information requests were handled by the LRCs from September 1996 through January 1998. As of January, information coordinators at each center were responding to an average of 12 staff information requests each month and were training approximately five staff persons per month. Across the NIS and CEE, this equates to nearly 500 staff trained and more than 1,000 information requests received per month.

AIHA also recently finished compiling the results of staff surveys conducted by each of the LRCs in the fall of 1997. Designed to help information coordinators collect data on staff skills and attitudes about their access to information, the surveys were conducted among more than 1,000 randomly selected staff at partnership institutions. (A similar survey had been conducted in January 1997 by NIS LRCs.) The results show that currently, between one-third and two-fifths of staff are regularly using the Internet as a source of information. Virtually none of the staff were using these resources prior to the beginning of the LRC project in 1996.

In addition to survey data, anecdotes culled from information coordinators' monthly reports indicate that access to technology is helping to improve efficiency and productivity. For example, physicians at Tallinn Central Hospital in Estonia recently introduced a new method of performing Caesarian sections using information obtained through MEDLINE and the Cochrane Database of Systematic Reviews. The technique has resulted in a significant reduction of operating time and use of suture material.

Through the LRC project, information coordinators have begun to point their colleagues toward a wealth of on-line resources that can help them make more informed clinical decisions. When physicians at the Kyrgyz Institute of Oncology and Radiology in Bishkek disagreed over the course of treatment for a patient with breast cancer, they went to partnership information coordinator Galina Sergeeva. She then checked available online research and contacted partners in Kansas City.

"We received responses very quickly, and my colleagues followed their recommendations," she said.