

Keeping Informed — No More Excuses

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One of the most frustrating aspects of professional practice is staying up to date with new developments in your field. For many pharmacists, the task of becoming informed about new drugs, as well as maintaining knowledge about the indications, side effects, and monitoring parameters for a large number of drugs and conditions, can be daunting. It can be a challenge to exercise the self-discipline to formally, systematically, and regularly seek out new information about drug therapy that would be useful in caring for future patients, a challenge that we frequently fail to meet. It is easy to look up information about a problem that has already been identified, but to seek information that might be useful for future problems or to learn about problems with drug therapy that we did not know even existed is much more difficult. Yet our future patients will expect us to be informed about the contemporary applications of available knowledge.

So, in the year 2003, I am not allowing myself (or you) to make any more excuses for not keeping up to date. With the electronic technology available today, reliance on your own self-discipline can be minimized. Instead, you can establish systems that force you to learn about new advances. The techniques discussed below can be used by anyone with Internet access, regardless of geographic location, the size of your department, or your practice field.

For me, the greatest challenge is becoming informed about new advances. In the past, this has required regularly searching out professional publications (usually journals) to find out what new information was being published. I (and probably most of you) have had difficulty setting a time and establishing a method to regularly and systematically review recent professional publications. But this whole process has recently become much easier. Most major professional publishers now offer, at no fee, a notification service

whereby the table of contents of all new issues is sent out by e-mail upon release. Once you've established your account, you do nothing except read the e-mail messages when they arrive. For example, Lippincott, Williams & Wilkins, a major publisher of medical journals, offers eTOC (e-mailed table of contents) services at <http://www.lwwonline.com>, and the same is available for many of Elsevier's professional publications at <http://www.ScienceDirect.com>. In each case, you select which journals you wish to scan and then supply your e-mail address. Unfortunately, most publishers do not offer access to the full text of recent volumes of their journals unless you subscribe, but most will allow you to read article abstracts, which lets you determine if you need to obtain the full article through traditional channels. If you know who publishes the journal that you want to regularly review (and if you don't, just do an Internet search to find out), visit the publisher's Web site to set up the eTOC service.

An alternative approach is to enroll with search companies, usually at no cost, to receive e-mail notices of new information. For example, you can enroll to receive notices of recent advances in the treatment of cardiac conditions at <http://www.theheart.org>. Similarly, <http://www.Amedeo.com> will send you a weekly newsletter on developments published in the major professional journals in the fields that you specify when you enroll. I have sometimes been concerned about who is paying for these services and what rewards (in the form of information about those using the service) they are receiving to justify their expenses, but I have not yet seen any information that was deliberately biased or incorrect or that could lead to future spam.

Now, receiving tables of contents and associated abstracts by e-mail should remove your reliance on self-discipline to scan professional publications. But once you find an article that you wish to review in



detail, you need to establish mechanisms for obtaining the full text. Most university libraries now have the full text of many professional journals available online for use by faculty, students, and preceptors. Therefore, I encourage those of you practising in teaching hospitals or teaching pharmacy students on rotation to contact your faculty of pharmacy to determine how you can have full access to the university library system. For those of you practising outside of academic circles, some Web sites do provide full-text access. By establishing an account (again, free) at <http://www.Medscape.com> you will be able to access the full text of articles from the publications to which Medscape subscribes. Similarly, some full-text access can be obtained at <http://www.freemedicaljournals.com> or <http://highwire.Stanford.edu>. Both of these Web sites allow you to establish e-mail alerts, link directly to journal Web sites, and view full-text articles, to the extent allowed by the publisher. In some cases, the most recent issues may not be available, but full-text access becomes available 6 to 12 months after publication. Alternatively, you can go directly to the journal Web site to access full-text articles. For *CJHP*, access is unrestricted at <http://www.cshp.ca>.

Given the ease with which the strategies described above can be established, we should no longer accept excuses for not being informed about new advances in our area of practice. You do not need to be a “techno-nerd” to set these services up, and they will run until you unsubscribe. I encourage all of you to investigate methods of systematizing the delivery of new information to your e-mail in-box. Of course, you still have to read the articles, but just finding them is half the battle.

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