

**Common knowledge : developing the National electronic Library for Health for All**

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### **Introduction**

The renewed emphasis on patient involvement and the move towards evidence-based practice underline the growing need for a common core of high quality information for all – the health professional, the health service manager and of course, the patient and the public. Developments in the UK National Health Service (NHS) have added weight and urgency to this need. The National electronic Library for Health (NeLH) <<http://www.nelh.nhs.uk>> has a key role to play, in providing a core knowledge base. The aim is to provide easy access to accredited information, as reflected in the mission statement:

*“...to improve health and healthcare, clinical practice, patient choice and patient influence on the NHS by providing easy access to best current knowledge and information”*

The NeLH is working alongside and in partnership with other key players, such as NHS Direct Online and NHS libraries. Partnership working is very much “in vogue” in the UK public sector but it also makes sense given a recent announcement by the Government, to establish a National Knowledge Service<sup>1</sup> for the NHS. This is currently in development and the NeLH team are contributing. Although it is as yet unclear how it will look, it seems that it will somehow connect up major information services, such as the NeLH, NHS libraries and NHS Direct Online.

### **The National electronic Library for Health**

The Pilot NeLH was launched in November 2000, based around a central web site (the core collection) with links to commissioned web sites (specialist resources). The site has now moved out of pilot mode and development work will transform the NeLH from a web site to a web service.

A small NeLH team is based at the NHS Information Authority, consisting of full and part time members, from varied backgrounds, including librarianship, informatics, medicine and allied health. This team is responsible for the core collection and central web site as well as co-ordinating the overall NeLH resources. It should be pointed out that many individuals and organisations have been involved in the development of the NeLH. Although much of the NeLH is openly accessible on the Internet, it is funded by the NHS in England; similar services exist in the UK : HOWIS in Wales <<http://www.wales.nhs.uk/>>, SHOW in Scotland <<http://www.show.scot.nhs.uk/>> and HONNI in Northern Ireland <<http://www.honni.qub.ac.uk/>>.

### **A common core of knowledge**

At the time of writing, the NeLH provides access to over 80 high quality resources, including bibliographic databases, secondary publications and full text publications. Many of these resources have been in existence some time but were previously scattered across a range of locations. The role of the NeLH has been to bring together existing resources, such as the Cochrane Library, with new services and resources, such as the NeLH Guidelines Database, to provide a user-friendly environment so that health professionals can easily access and apply evidence to practice.

The NeLH broke new ground when it licensed evidence-based knowledge products such as the Cochrane Library and Clinical Evidence on behalf of the NHS in England. As far as possible, the NeLH is committed to making health information available to all who need access. In 2001, an agreement was made between the Joint Information Systems Committee (JISC) and the NeLH to provide seamless access to the Cochrane Library for staff and students in higher education, believed to be the first ever cross-sectoral agreement between the NHS and the education community. Such collaborative efforts are considered vital if both education and health sectors are to be given the high-quality resources that are essential to creating a lifelong learning society. Currently, the NeLH is working with a group led by the NHS Regional Librarians Group and involving the NHS Purchasing and Supplies Agency, to investigate the licensing of databases and e-journals for the NHS in England.

One challenge is to find ways of making information and knowledge readily available to whoever needs it, through whichever 'channel' they may be using (for example the NeLH website, a library portal, digital TV, or electronic patient record). Some resources in the NeLH have licensing restrictions, which are managed using the Athens Access Management <<http://www.athens.nhs.uk>> system. Access management is a crucial issue for the NeLH as many health professionals don't have easy access to a computer at work, and many undertake study in their own time. It is therefore important to offer both work and home based access to NeLH resources.

At the EAHIL workshop in Sardinia, Veronica Fraser spoke about the need to develop a business case to obtain funding. The Outline Business Case has now been approved and work now starts on the Full Business Case and a procurement exercise to move the NeLH from a project to a service.

### **Key stakeholders : Health professionals and Managers**

In addition to providing a core collection to assist health professionals in decision making, the NeLH aims to support knowledge sharing between professionals, through its Virtual Branch Libraries and Professional Portals.

The Virtual Branch Libraries have an important role in bringing together stakeholders to work together to manage the knowledge base for key health priority areas. Each of the Virtual Branch Libraries is focused around a web site, which typically offers a collection of evaluated resources and a discussion forum. At the time of writing, the following Virtual Branch Libraries are available, but at different stages of development:

- Cancer
- Child Health
- Communicable diseases
- Diabetes
- Diagnostics
- Emergency Care
- Health informatics
- Health management
- Heart diseases
- Learning disabilities
- Mental health
- Palliative care
- Primary care
- Public health
- Rare diseases
- Screening

There are plans to cover further disciplines and subject areas, such as musculoskeletal disorders and genetics. In addition to their key knowledge management role, the Virtual Branch Libraries also work to integrate NeLH resources with other key developments.

Professional portals act as doorways onto NeLH content, serving the information needs of specific professional groups. As well as providing a single entry point to the evidence, these portals focus on the development of knowledge skills in specific professions. They are important resources, developed in partnership with relevant professional bodies and academic organisations, supporting a range of professionals who can be difficult to reach. This collaborative approach facilitates links between the NeLH and relevant developments in a specific profession.

At the time of writing, professional portals are available for the following professional groups, with some scoping work underway for further portals:

- Community practitioners
- Dieticians
- Librarians
- Midwives
- Nurses
- Occupational therapists
- Orthoptists
- Patient Advice and Liaison Officers
- Physiotherapists
- Podiatrists
- Radiographers
- Speech and language therapists

Consultation with users is carried out continually through a site feedback facility.

Additionally, two evaluation studies <<http://www.nhsia.nhs.uk/nelh/background.asp>> and a market research study have been conducted, involving telephone interviews and focus groups. The majority of comments from users are positive and encouraging:

- This site has the "wow" factor - lots of information clearly and easily available. I am very impressed and will certainly re-visit and encourage colleagues to do so (Nurse)
- This is the mother of all websites for the health professional. (General Practitioner)
- A wonderful site. It has taken me 20 minutes to access sites and information that I have searched other sites in vain for. (Midwife)

The NeLH experienced a thirty-fold increase in usage over 2001. Awareness of the NeLH has improved over the latter half of 2001 and in 2002, with several well-placed publicity campaigns.

### **Key stakeholders : Librarians**

By working with librarians, the NeLH is developing into a service which enhances and integrates with existing libraries. Communication is a key issue and communication channels with key groups have been established. Many librarians have been involved in developing resources for the NeLH, such as Hitting the Headlines and Document of the Week. Increasingly, the NeLH is working in partnership with librarians on national issues with a view to creating seamless services.

Whereas the NeLH focuses on providing fast and easy electronic-only access to a core of research-derived evidence, library networks offer access to the wider knowledgebase (printed and electronic). The remit of NHS libraries is broader – libraries offer face to face contact and localised services. Integration of the NeLH with local services and resources is fundamental and projects are underway to scope the issues.

As well as changes in the library profession, there are huge structural changes taking place in the UK which will impact on how health libraries are funded and managed. The NeLH is in an ideal position to support librarians in new and evolving roles, most notably through the NeLH Librarian Development Programme, which has funded seminars and workshops. Following a suggestion from a librarian, a professional portal for health librarians and information professionals <<http://www.nelh.nhs.uk/librarian>> has been developed in partnership with the NHS Regional Librarians Group, the Health Libraries Group and the NHS Libraries Advisor. The Librarians Portal will enable the sharing of best practice on topical issues such as evidence based librarianship and knowledge management.

### Key stakeholders : Patients and public

The main user base of the pilot NeLH is primarily clinicians whilst NHS Direct Online <<http://www.nhsdirect.nhs.uk/>> has been seen as the first port of call for patients, the public and carers. Increasingly the NHS will offer clinicians and patients access to a common core of information: a key aim of the NHS Cancer Information Strategy<sup>2</sup> is to “ensure that accurate, comprehensive and comprehensible information about cancer is accessible to all those who need it”. NeLH has partnered with NHS Direct Online on several campaigns on major health issues – recent examples include resources on schizophrenia <<http://cebmh.warne.ox.ac.uk/cebmh/nelmh/schizophrenia/index.html>> and diabetes <<http://cebmh.warne.ox.ac.uk/diabetes/professional/>>. In March 2002, NeLH and NHS Direct Online held a stakeholder consultation around black and minority ethnic health issues to ensure that the information we provide is relevant to all our health communities.

A handful of resources are currently licensed primarily for NHS staff in England but with the new focus on patients and the public, there are plans to “open up” two key resources – the Cochrane Library and Clinical Evidence – for all in England. Access for members of the public has already been tested in a pilot project, based at the University of Central England and jointly funded by Resource and the Department of Health. Early evidence from a small number of users suggests that the NeLH is being used for personal health information and for study and work related enquiries.

### Key stakeholders : the NHS family

Within the UK, there is a move to better integrate health and social care services. In 1999, the Department of Health gave funding to the National Institute for Social Work (NISW) to develop an electronic Library for Social Care <<http://www.elsc.org.uk>> to complement the work begun in health by the NeLH. The eLSC, along with the NISW Caredata database, transferred to the newly established Social Care Institute for Excellence (SCIE) in October 2001. The eLSC will have a key role in making the social care knowledge base accessible. In 2001, a scoping study was commissioned from Information Management Associates to explore the interface between the NeLH and the eLSC.

### Achievements and milestones

December 1999	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Launch of NeLH-PC, the Virtual Branch Library for Primary Care</li> </ul>
November 2000	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Launch of the Pilot NeLH, with access to licensed resources limited to the NHS network</li> </ul>
March 2001	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Internet access to <i>Cochrane Library</i> and <i>Clinical Evidence</i> enabled using the Athens access management system</li> </ul>
April 2001	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Launch of the first professional portal, for speech and language therapists</li> </ul>
May 2001	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>Evidence Based On Call</i>, <i>Medendum e-guidelines</i>, <i>Xrefer medical dictionaries</i> licensed by the NeLH</li> </ul>

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Virtual Branch Library for Communicable Diseases launched</li> <li>• Professional portals for Midwifery, Nursing, Radiography and Podiatry launched</li> </ul>
June 2001	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Virtual Branch Library for Screening launched</li> <li>• Professional portals for Dietetics and Physiotherapy launched</li> </ul>
July 2001	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Professional portals for Occupational Therapy and Orthoptists launched</li> </ul>
August 2001	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>Primal Pictures Anatomy</i> database licensed by the NeLH</li> <li>• Site maps created to aid navigation</li> </ul>
September 2001	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>NeLH Care Pathways Database</i> launched</li> <li>• Virtual Branch Library for Emergency Care launched</li> <li>• Evaluation studies from University of Wales and NCC Group published on NeLH site</li> <li>• Schizophrenia portal launched on Virtual Branch Library for Mental Health</li> </ul>
October 2001	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Joint launch with Joint Information Systems Committee enabling access to the <i>Cochrane Library</i> for the education sector</li> <li>• Launch of <i>zetoc</i> on the NeLH by the British Library</li> <li>• Virtual Branch Library for Child Health launched</li> </ul>
November 2001	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Launch of NeLH pilot search engine</li> </ul>
December 2001	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Pilot search engine records 55,000 searches</li> <li>• NeLH involved in Diabetes National Service Framework website</li> <li>• Link to <i>DIPEX</i> (Database of Individual Patient Experiences) added to NeLH</li> </ul>
January 2002	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b><i>Clinical Improvement Projects</i></b> database licensed by NeLH</li> <li>• Professional portal for PALS (Patient Advice and Liaison Services) launched</li> <li>• Professional portal for health librarians launched</li> <li>• Site usage reaches 2.7m hits</li> </ul>
February 2002	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• First online continuing professional development modules launched</li> <li>• Breast cancer web resource launched with NHS Direct Online</li> <li>• Diabetes knowledgebase for NHS professionals launched</li> </ul>
April 2002	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>Informed Choice</i> resource for midwives and patients launched by NeLH and MIDIRS</li> <li>• A new publicity page published, enabling downloading and ordering of NeLH publicity materials</li> <li>• Virtual Branch Library for Health Informatics expanded to include a newsfeed of events and a directory</li> </ul>
May 2002	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• NeLH works with the Royal College of Nursing to include guidelines on child pain in the <i>NeLH Guidelines Database</i></li> </ul>

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The Virtual Branch Library for Cancers asks for clinical questions for systematic review and new trials</li> </ul>
June 2002	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>Clinical Evidence</i> hits the news with its findings on the MMR vaccine</li> </ul>
July 2002	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Intranet template launched to enable integration of NeLH with local resources in NHS organisations</li> <li>• A training resource developed in partnership with librarians launched</li> <li>• New distance learning packs on acupuncture and sibutramine launched with the TRIP Virtual Classroom</li> </ul>

The remainder of 2002 will be busy, with several promotional activities planned to publicise new resources and services.

**Find out more about NeLH**

This brief overview gives an outline of some of the work undertaken to develop the National electronic Library for Health. If you would like to find out more, please visit the NeLH web site <<http://www.nelh.nhs.uk>> or read our latest article, to be published shortly:

Turner A et al. A first class knowledge service : developing the National electronic Library for Health. Health Information and Libraries Journal; in press.

Prepared : 14 August 2002

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<sup>1</sup> Building the Information Core January 2002 update.  
 <<http://www.doh.gov.uk/ipu/whatnew/itevent/progrepdec.htm#22>>.  
<sup>2</sup> NHS Executive. *Cancer Information Strategy*. London: Department of Health, 2000.  
 <<http://www.doh.gov.uk/cancer/cis.htm>>.