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**Health information provision in Italy: current state and future development of the Italian  
WHO Documentation Centre**

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**Abstract**

Health information and user services provided by the Istituto Superiore di Sanità (ISS) – the National Institute of Health – as the Italian Documentation Centre of the WHO Regional Office for Europe are described. This Centre, active since the beginning of the 90s, over the years has expanded in the number and type of services offered. After examining the present situation at the ISS, improvements and implementations are proposed for the next future.

In the framework of the availability and the accessibility of WHO documentation, details about the following services set up at the ISS Library are supplied: reference, document delivery, exchange of duplicate issues, user education, statistical reports. Besides, the authors describe the web site of the Italian WHO/DC, launched in June 2001 and aimed to improve the use of WHO information and documentation in order to make the Centre a focus of interest in the country.

As for the future, the results of this study can be used as tools to investigate about some items like, for example, who is actually using the WHO information, to what extent and to what effect. A further remarkable topic will be offered by the comparison of the use between WHO documentation and other literature on the health-related subject. The paper concludes that the policy in spreading health information calls also for major change in organisational thinking and acceptance by the librarians involved in the WHO Documentation centres that their service must be open to continuous development.

**Introduction**

The uppermost purpose of health information is, in global terms, the implementation and distribution of knowledge in order to improve the health and health care of the population. The achievement of a satisfactory well-being for all is the fundamental target of WHO activity and it is strictly connected to the promotion of correct scientific and public health information distribution. In Italy, at the start of the second millennium a nation-wide health information service for the general public can be defined as fragmentary because it is performed by different structures in private and public sectors. In this context one of the main information providers is the Italian National Institute of Health, Istituto Superiore di Sanità (ISS), the technical scientific organ of the Italian National Health Service, Servizio Sanitario Nazionale (SSN). According to its institutional tasks, confirmed in the new rule of ISS dated January 20<sup>th</sup> 2001 (DPR 70/2001) this Institute has research, experimental, control and training functions in the field of public health in Italy and shares the responsibility of scientific and health planning with the Minister of Health. In addition, ISS gives scientific support also to regional and local (both public and private) authorities involved in public health or sanitary subjects and affairs. As a consequence the ISS Library, specialized in scientific documentation in the biomedical and health fields, supports the activities of the Institute and plays a fundamental role in the spreading of information at local, national and international level. In particular the setting up of the Italian Documentation Centre of the World Health Organization/Regional Office for Europe (WHO/DC) at the ISS has given a remarkable boost to co-operation in the European region.

**Role and functions of WHO/DCs**

WHO documentation Centres functions were outlined by the Berlin Workshop in 1990 when the following basic recommendations were defined with the aim of disseminating WHO information as widely as possible:

- collection, indexing, cataloguing and storage of WHO documentation;
- evaluation of the impact and usefulness of different forms of WHO documentation;
- advice on national distribution of WHO documentation;
- evaluation of efficiency and effectiveness of WHO documentation;
- support for information retrieval and document delivery;
- reproduction and distribution of documents;
- translation of documentation into national languages;
- promotion of priced publications with sales agents;
- creation of a Network of WHO/DCs.

Ten years later new items have been derived from the application of digital technology such as the evaluation of the impact of online access to full-text, the creation of reference tools for new ways to exploitate virtual resources, the planning of training courses for users and the improvement of the knowledge of WHO web page content.

### **The Italian WHO Documentation Centre at ISS**

The Italian Documentation Centre of the World Health Organization-Regional Office for Europe (WHO/EURO) was officially designated in 1991. The Centre takes advantage of the co-operation of the all informative structures active at ISS: the Library, the Documentation Service (SD), the Service for the Editorial and Publishing Activities (SAE) and the technical services concerned with data processing (SED and CED). In this framework the Library plays a central role not only because of its large collection of WHO documents that allows it to act *de facto* as a WHO Depository Library, but also because it is the reference point in the documentation relationship with WHO and in this sense it coordinates the activity of the other informative structures.

According to the Berlin Recommendations ISS Library has been working at the integral input of the whole set of WHO documents in the online catalogue now available via Internet. The English and Italian editions of WHO series have been catalogued both under their series and their proper title, whereas the editions in other languages have been catalogued only under the series title.

The documentary estate of ISS Library accounts about 250.000 bibliographic descriptions relating to a various typology of information resources: books, reports, journals, cd-rom, grey literature and electronic resources. Additionally, 4.232 units concerning WHO documents are available at present in the online catalogue. With regard to WHO journals, they are managed automatically through the Periodicals control function of the Dobis/Libis System (D/L) which allows users to know in real time what volumes and issues are available in the Library. Even if the online availability of a wide range of WHO documents facilitates a desktop access to the full-text through the web, the detailed information offered by the D/L OPAC about the paper copy of WHO documents, including printed journals, is still essential.

### **State of art of WHO/DC activity at ISS**

The Centre supports the activity of the World Health Organization (WHO) by promoting, in Italy, the distribution of the documentation produced by the offices of WHO-Headquarters, WHO-Europe and also by other WHO Regional Offices. To this aim, the Centre gathers and files such documentation, retrieves bibliographical references, offers a reading service, a local and remote reference service and provides the users with the original document. The Centre takes part in the international exchange of duplicate medical literature (IHLE) and intends to give online access to its archive through the web.

A dedicated room for WHO publications and documents was set up to collect systematically the material and to allow users to access directly to open shelves. The direct access by single users generated some difficulties in quantizing and evaluating the use *in loco* of the WHO documents. The problem has being solved through forms and questionnaires to be filled-in daily by the library staff and users also with a view of enabling a statistical analysis of the data.

The Centre promotes translations into Italian of WHO documents of special relevance and reviews of WHO publications concerning specific issues: the ISS official publication, *Annali dell'Istituto Superiore di Sanità*, offers online availability to them (PDF format) at the address [www.iss.it/annali](http://www.iss.it/annali) (a project to become the focal point of the Italian translations spread all over the Country is in progress); the Centre offers in addition hand-on guides to search in WHO archives and organizes training courses to people working in the Italian National Health Service, Local Health Units, Research Institutes, University and Biomedical Libraries as support in accessing and selecting pertinent and qualified public health information available on the web.

Continuing education is one of the uppermost requests by users, Library staff and general public and the Centre is providing an annual plan to satisfy internal and external documentation and information needs on different topics in public health field.

One of the most meaningful and uptodate support services offered to internal and external users consists in the realization of the ISS WHO/DC web page where are described the online opportunities. This web site is designed just to provide the users with an instrument to select the most direct and effective information among the many possible (and maybe conflicting and less useful) access possibilities. It is therefore a convergence tool for information resources spread on the Net. It allows the user to find, through various links, the right site to search for information, to identify a document, to site it and to get it.

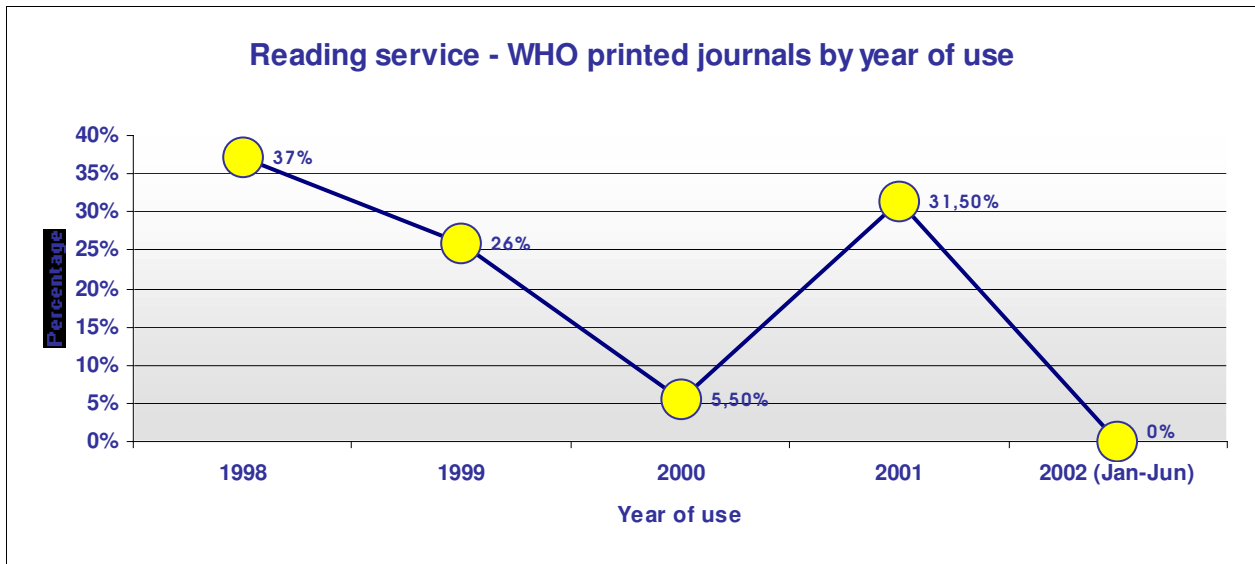
Promotion activities are also carried-on by the Centre such as:

- spreading of informative material (leaflets, briefs, posters) in the framework of Congresses and professional meetings in the field of both information science, public health and/or scientific disciplines;
- delivery of circular letters to the Italian scientific community in order to give notice of new activities of the Centre;
- editing informative papers on WHO Centre's activity to be published in news, bulletins and professional journals issued by national and international official authorities in the field of information and library science (i.e. the Italian Library Association, the Italian Association of Advanced Documentation, European Association for Health Information and Libraries, etc.).

### **Library services**

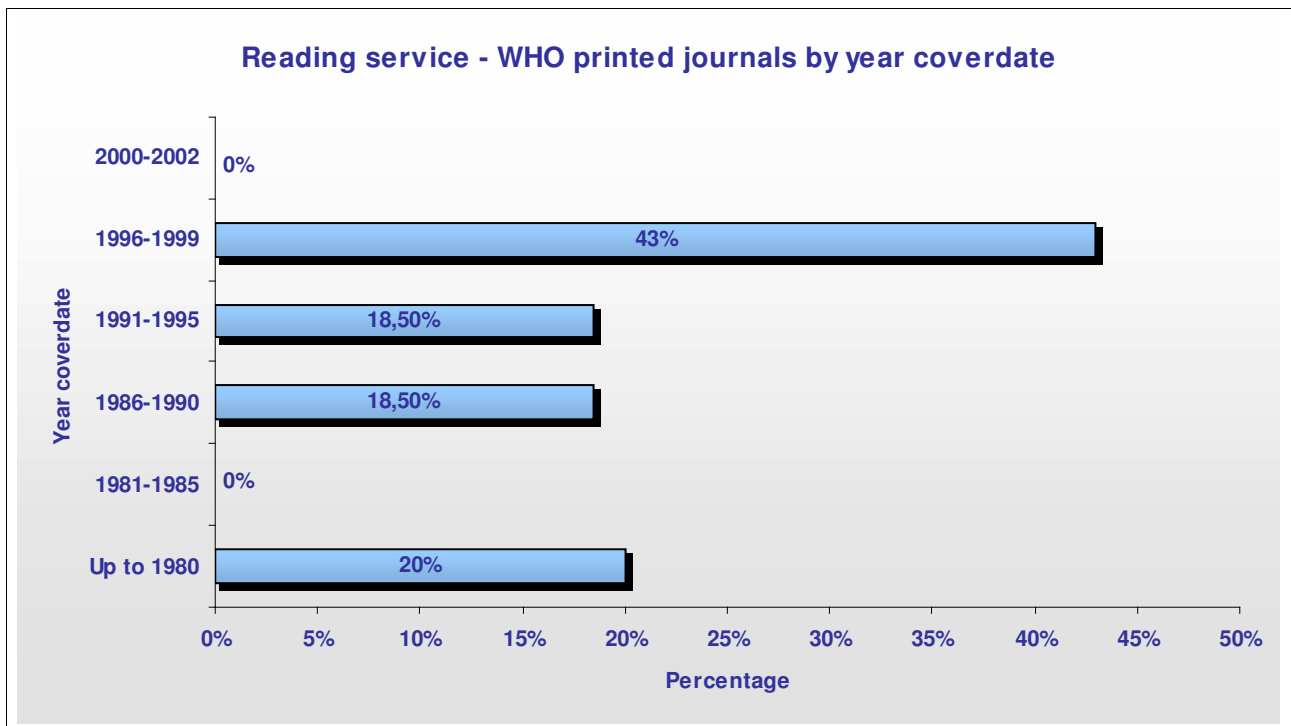
Information services supplied by the ISS Library are devoted to internal and external users. The **reading service** allows patrons to use the Library in a traditional way spending a good range of their time studying and reading print documents. This means that - even if the information environment is becoming increasingly digital - there is still a substantial request for the most traditional library services.

Some graphs, derived from the analysis of the statistical data referring to the last five years including the period January-June 2002, are presented in this section. The first one below shows the use of WHO printed journals by year and refers to internal and external patrons using the Library locally.

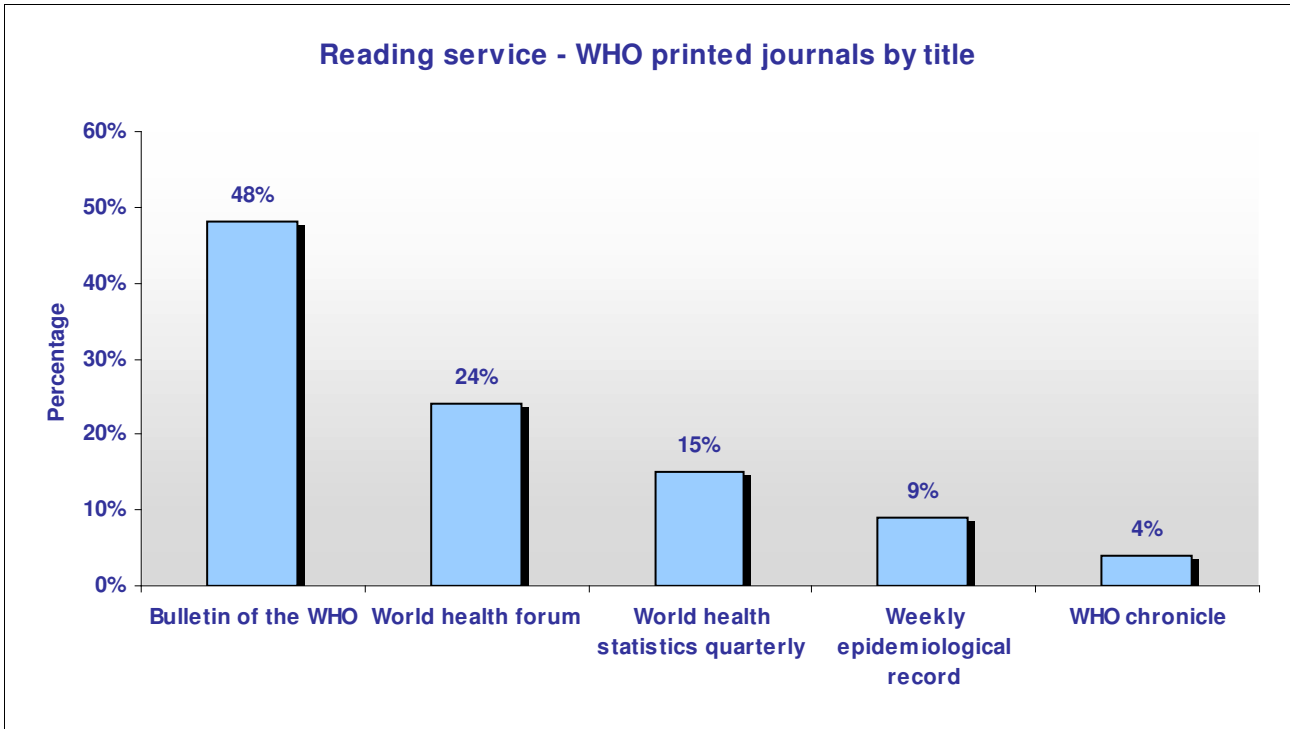


The data collected show a continuous decrease in the reading of printed materials and the percentage rising in 2001 (31,50%) is due to the use of historical documentation not yet available in Internet.

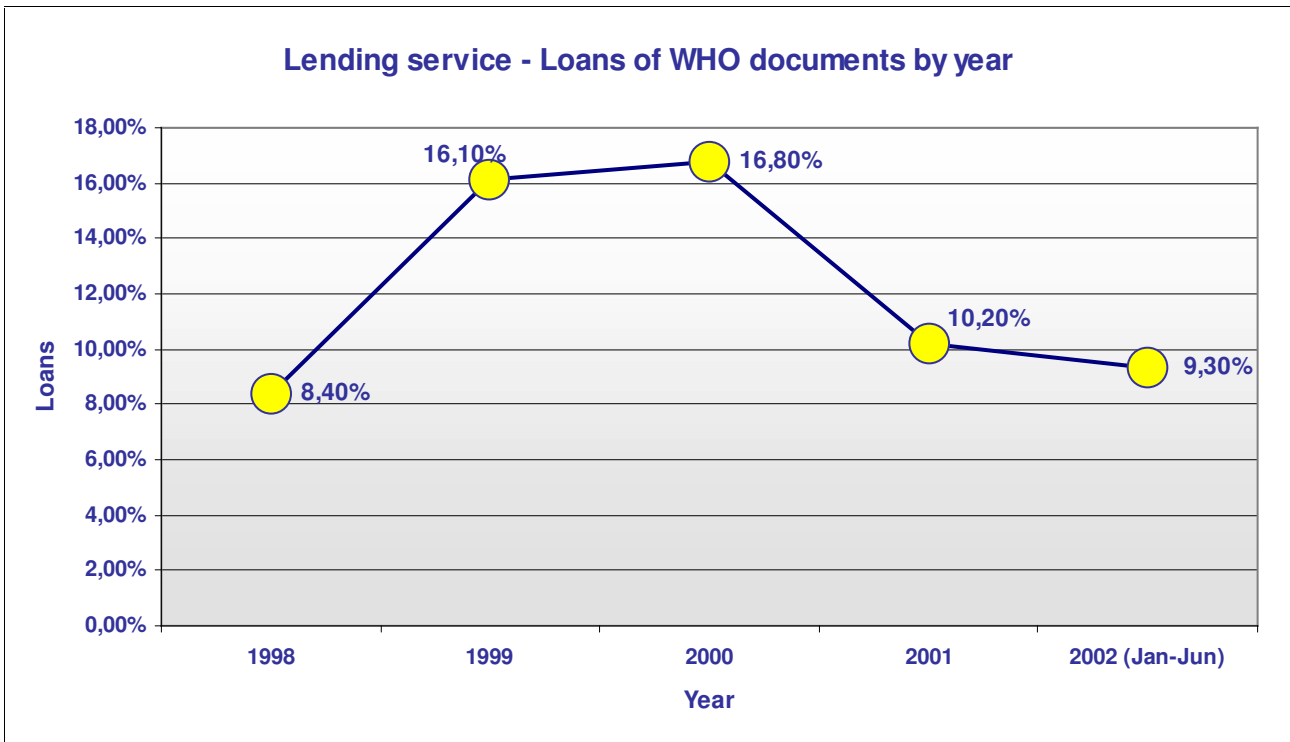
The next graph concerning the use of WHO printed journals by year coverdate refers to the Reading service in the last five years: it testifies the users' tendency to consult above all printed journals dated back till the year 1999.



The following graph refers to the use of WHO printed journals by title and testifies the interest of the users in the printed version of WHO periodicals also in the case of discontinued titles (see *WHO chronicle*).

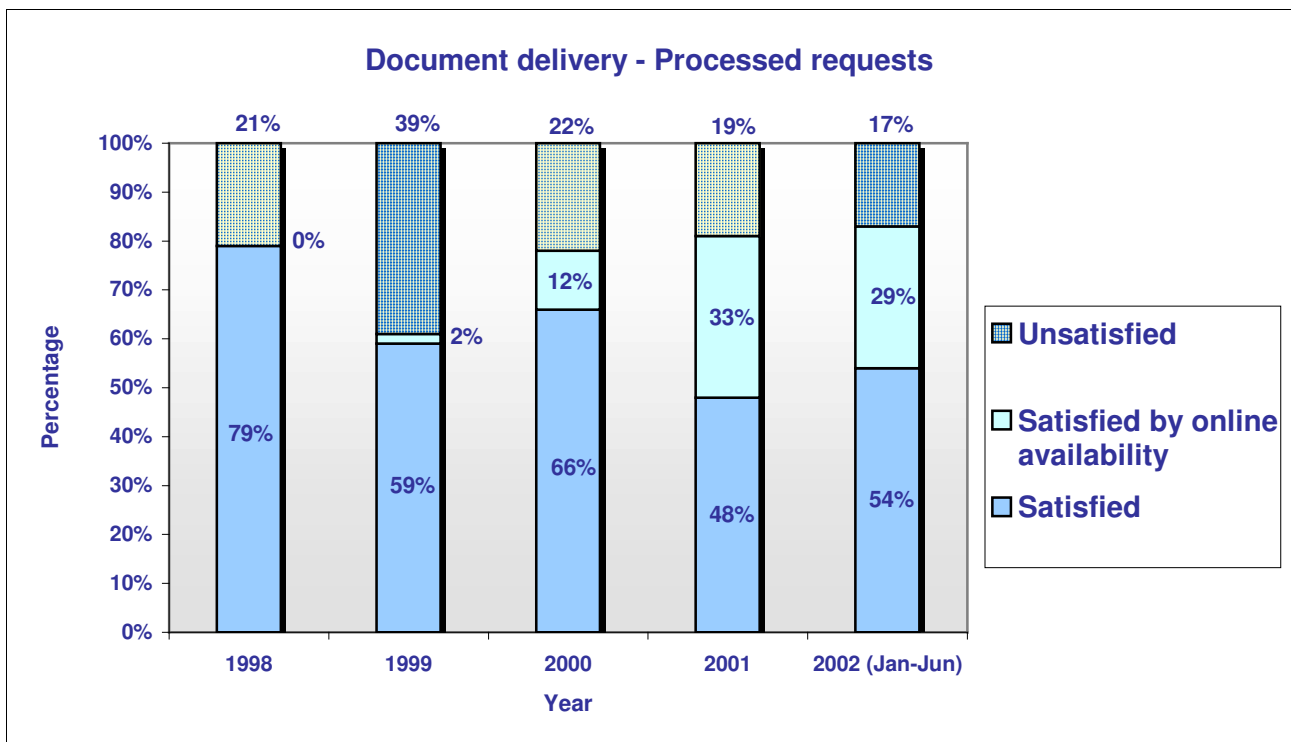


The **lending service** is devoted exclusively to the ISS users who are allowed to borrow for a limited period of time only monographic volumes. Over the last years, having libraries moved from a holdings environment to an access one, becoming the online access more and more equivalent to the library holding, the lending service is now less popular among patrons who can easily access to the growing number of full-text sources available in the Net. The graph below shows how also at the ISS Library the electronic access to full-text resources has caused a progressive decrease of the loans number starting from the year 2000.

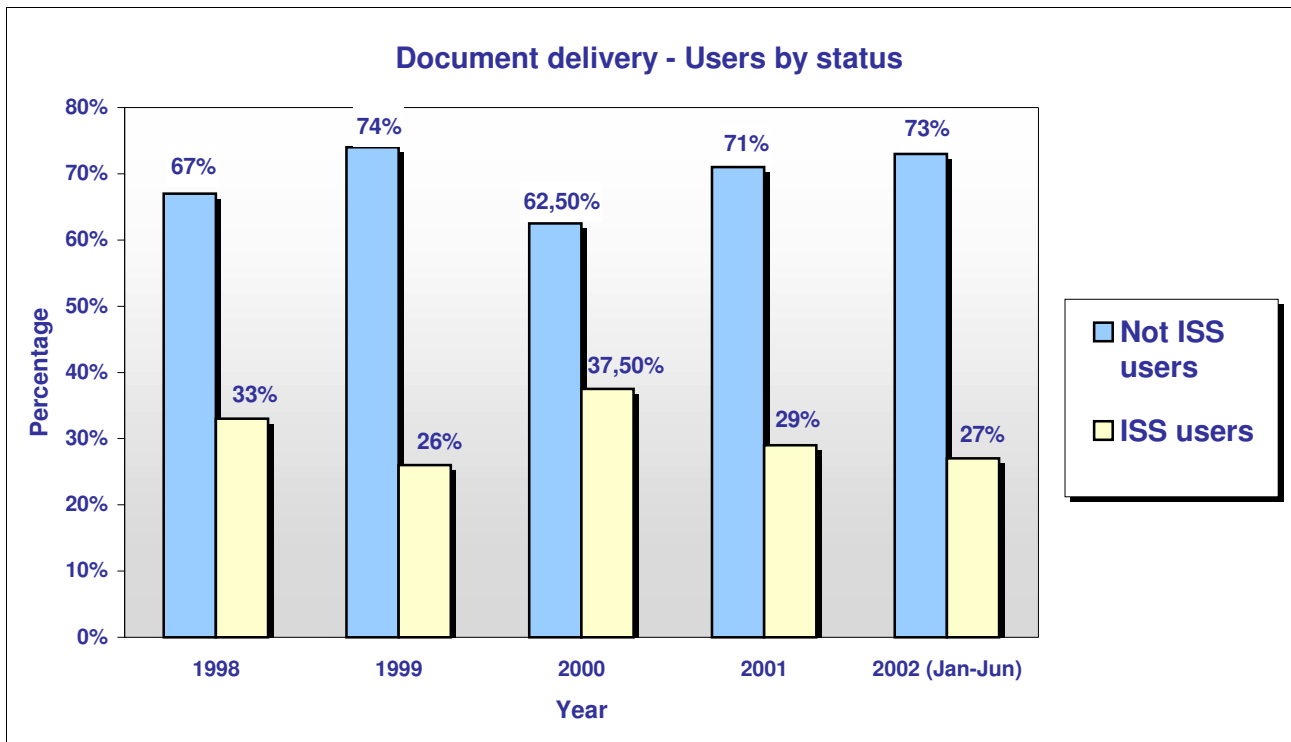


Through the **Document delivery service (DDS)** remote and local patrons can get WHO documents by applying their requests directly to the ISS Library. Documents are supplied free of charge in the print edition (if a duplicate volume is available) or in photocopy. As no library is completely self sufficient, it is very important to rely on a DDS efficiently organized in order to satisfy as widely as possible the patrons' needs. From this point of view the library audits must be taken into due consideration because they are the main means of verifying the end user satisfaction revealing when a DDS moves from efficiency to effectiveness.

The next graph refers to the requests for the document delivery service processed at the ISS Library. It summarizes the satisfied/unsatisfied requests per year and underlines how the requests satisfied through the online resources have increased from 0% in 1998 to 29% in the first six months of the current year. Once again it is interesting to notice that the availability of full-text documents in the Net has been increasingly modifying the library services.



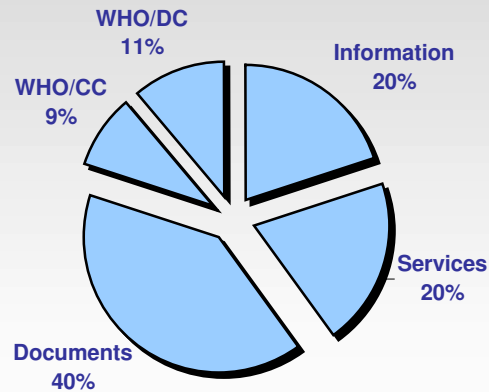
The document delivery requests can be forwarded to the ISS Library by local (internal and external) and remote patrons. The data collected for the graph below divide users by status and show how the request percentage has been evolving over the years.



#### **Information service: the Italian WHO/DC site**

In the digital era the electronic tools provide a basic means of achieving full-text, bibliographic or factual information directly from the Internet. As a consequence, libraries and documentation services are increasingly investing their funds in establishing and developing web-based resources. In June 2001 the Italian WHO/DC launched its own web site ([www.whodc.iss.it](http://www.whodc.iss.it)) in order to supply users with a tool aimed to aggregate the different information sources disseminated in the Net. The data related to the WHO/DC web site presented below confirm once again the users' tendency to rely on web-based tools. The graph refers to the period June 2001-June 2002 and shows the percentage of connections for any single page.

**Information service -The Italian WHO/DC site**  
*www.whodc.iss.it*



### **Conclusions**

In the light of the results obtained, it appears that the WHO/DC at ISS has given satisfactory answer to the recommendations and priorities suggested at the Berlin Meeting. In this respect the ISS Centre is projecting to implement the existing activities by ameliorating and updating them through a statistical analysis, as exhaustive as possible, of the use of WHO documentation utilizing all necessary parameters in order to reach an efficient distribution of informative resources. Particular attention will be devoted to the continuing education and to the coordination of the Italian translation of WHO documents edited both by ISS and other publishers. In addition, the Centre aims to implement its web site by introducing new sections, such as "Accession list" and "Duplicate Medical literature online availability" and by offering further services like "What's new", "Ask a librarian" and so on.

No doubt both these information diffusion efforts and this strong determination to let as many scientific communities as possible to know the potentialities of information resources offered by WHO have a weight on the management of worldwide welfare problems. Perhaps this may be even little by no means insignificant to contribute to fill the heavy gap on the matter between states and regions in the world digitally divided into "inforich and infopoor". There are still "excellence centres" which create, gather and utilize the highest part of information and, on the other side, people or countries that can only obtain essential suggestions scarcely and/or with an unacceptable delay. Referring then to the above cited training courses on the best ways to reach all with the needed knowledge, an aspect merits to be mentioned: it is not enough to offer the information, it is also important that this may be acquired in the form and extension necessitated by the individual user or circumstance. The eternal goodness of the fable teaches us: the poor stork doesn't succeed in tasting the exquisite food-bit because the dish is inadequate to its bill.

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