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Using the Internet to Extend the Knowledge Base of General Practice Organisations

Abstract:

How can we, as researchers, use the internet to collect and share information, now that most organisations have broadband internet access? Information and communication technologies play an important role in developing the knowledge base of the meso-level general practice organisations known as the Division Network, creating a firm structure to support informal knowledge exchange within the network, and to drive improvement in health service provision. Routine annual reporting for accountability and information purposes has been greatly enhanced by use of the internet, by improving the quality of data collected and the capacity to share the resulting information.

The Primary Health Care Research and Information Service (PHC RIS) moved to online administration of the Annual Survey of Divisions (ASD) of General Practice in 2006. Our motivation to move from a Word to Web format was two-fold – to improve the quality of the data and reduce respondent burden. Considerable effort was expended to ensure the online data entry tool was practical, intuitive, secure, and available for simultaneous access for multiple users. We found that the web survey resulted in more efficient data collection, reduced error rates and an easier process for respondents. However, it was apparent that not all users adapted well to the new methods.

The results of the Annual Survey of Divisions have appeared in a series of reports over twelve years, a valuable resource widely used by policy makers, the Divisions Network and researchers. However, a report format cannot adequately account for the depth of information collected. The internet creates an opportunity to present information in new interactive ways. PHC RIS has developed a suite of online tools and resources to present results from the ASD and extend the knowledge base about primary health services in Australia. These tools will be discussed, with an analysis of online activity.