

## **Online Learning to Support Nurses' Professional Development: Paper prepared by Stuart Cable and Caroline Lynch for presentation at the Umbrella 2003 Conference, Manchester**

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In April 2002 the Royal College of Nursing launched a new online learning service – the RCN Learning Zone – to support the professional development of its 360,000 members. This provided the opportunity to develop an interactive learning environment with information integrated throughout. This paper outlines the background to the development of this integrated service, identifies the principles underlying the developments, and discusses the value and challenges of integrating seamlessly the work learning and information teams.

Planning the new learning service, and drawing upon the experience of educational and information team members, highlighted the challenges which confront nurses working in the clinical area in accessing both good quality information and professional development opportunities. The development of the RCN Learning Zone consequently adopted the concept of the 'busy nurse' to guide how the services were designed. This therefore demanded a number of features, including the guiding principles of quality, availability, access (not simply having access to computer equipment and an Internet link but in an intuitive and navigable design) and seamlessness in integrating the RCN Learning Zone components with other existing facilities. In order to achieve this there was agreement between the Lifelong Learning Team, who have organisational responsibility for the RCN Learning Zone, and RCN Library and Information

Services, who already had many well-established resources available to members, to build the service gradually in an integrated and collaborative way.

The library and information services that the RCN offers to its membership include a range of online services:

- BNI – a key nursing database
- 12 full text nursing journals
- The RCN Library Catalogue
- Libraries for Nurses – a user-friendly facility for identifying nursing libraries across the UK, with information on the services they provide.

These services have been developed over a number of years to meet the needs of the geographically dispersed RCN membership. They are designed to provide remote access, ease of use, content relevant to the specific needs of nurses and a service that is free at point of use. In developing a new service, the Lifelong Learning Team adopted many of these principles in the design of the new platform to deliver the RCN Learning Zone services. This was not least because of the success of the RCN Library and Information Services which was illustrated by an enthusiastic uptake with a total of 30,000 users of BNI and the e-journal services within 30 months of launch.

The RCN Learning Zone, developed in partnership with AXIA CitizenConnect, has also been well received. In the year following its launch the service had 13,000 registered users,<sup>1</sup> exceeding organisational targets for uptake by a wide margin.

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<sup>1</sup> The service was launched at the end of April 2002 and current uptake stands is over 17,000, with approximately 1,000 new registrants per month

The fundamental guiding principle of the RCN Learning Zone is that it should support the personal and professional development of nurses. This involves providing high quality information, building bite-sized chunks of learning and integrating with other RCN services currently available online such as the RCN Mental Health Zone, RCN clinical guidelines, RCN Faculty of Emergency Nursing initiative and the wealth of library and information services available to members outlined above.

The RCN Learning Zone offers a range of different services to support to personal and professional development of nurses. These include:

- an electronic portfolio
- a career development area
- a range of learning areas
- a gateway to RCN and other quality clinical guidelines
- a place for professional dialogue
- a searchable compilation of professionally relevant resources
- access to RCN library and information services.

The outline of the services offered above demonstrates that the online medium can make a range of resources accessible to users. However, without integrated planning the developments could have occurred in silos and the principle of seamlessness could potentially have been undermined. Close working between the Lifelong Learning Team and the Library and Information Services Team was therefore essential to the success of the RCN Learning Zone. As a consequence, a representative from the Library and Information Services Team was invited to join the Lifelong Learning Team. This action has proved valuable for a number of reasons:



- Service developments are more coherent and benefits to RCN members are maximised, e.g. the free e-journals service has enabled RCN Learning Zone users to have seamless access, within chunks of learning, to full-text sources.
- Cost-effective marketing e.g. mutual promotion of services, access to different audiences have supported the dissemination of information of the services.
- Wider expertise, e.g. when developing categories for learning, expertise in information management and cataloguing has broadened the knowledge base for identifying user-friendly and effective criteria.
- Greater organisational clout! Based on the notion of the whole being greater than the sum of its parts and weight of numbers.

However, it would be unfair to suggest that integrated working has been without its own challenge. As with any team building, this has required investment of time in developing relationships and therefore has demonstrated the importance of commitment to the ethos by all parties and by line/function managers. There are occasions where service commitment priorities can conflict and these have to be actively managed. There are also issues around having to learn a new language and understand the perspectives/ priorities of different team members.

In this paper we have tried to illustrate two developments that with organisational commitment and the building of a strong team representing different parts of the Royal College of Nursing are becoming more intimately linked. The seamless integration, we believe, is the right way to develop a core resource for

professional development which integrates information and learning in ways that puts the user in the driving seat. Our approach is perhaps summed up most eloquently by Winston Churchill who stated,

*'Personally I am always ready to learn, although I do not always like being taught'.*

This view is, in our experience, what a large proportion of nurses also consider they need and it is our aim to provide the resources and the support to respond to their needs.

#### Reference

RCN web site: [www.rcn.org.uk](http://www.rcn.org.uk)

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## Librarian on location: visiting health libraries in Kuala Lumpur

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I recently braved the SARS risk to visit a relative in Kuala Lumpur. A few weeks before that I had the bizarre urge to track down a fellow health librarian and do a little global networking. By the power of Google I made contact with Zainal Ahmad, Medical Librarian at the Hospital Kuala Lumpur, and arranged a meeting. Zainal – part-time mechanic, computer engineer and IFLA member – was kind enough to spend a whole morning taking me on a whistle-stop tour.