

COMMENTARY

Knowledge-base black holes: the next (small) big thing?

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The so-called digital age now permeates every aspect of life for individuals in the industrial world. The range of information available is massive and bewildering in scope. Such has been the explosion of the volume of information available that questions are being rightly asked about the wisdom of the extent of accessibility. There are very few checks and balances as to what types and accuracy of information being made available, other than the discretion of the author about the appropriateness of the information and context in which it is being delivered.

It is undeniably true that accessibility has helped science and medicine in particular. For the purposes of education, research, and direct patient care, the availability of specialised data has been an enormous boon. Increasingly, the availability of peer-reviewed information has shortened the period given to literature review from months to days, and, for many projects, the vast majority of relevant information is digitally available.

However, there are loopholes in the information available to medical researchers, and particularly to those interested in healthcare planning. Specifically, policy documents and the published works of working parties are only sporadically available. Many scientists and clinicians spend a great deal of time sitting on expert panels, working parties, and specialist committees working to collect, collate, and consider information pertaining to a huge range of issues. These can involve making decisions about the organisation of a specialist service, the suitability of employing screening methodologies in a given population, or the optimal way of preparing for a major incident.

The work of such a group may go on for many months or years, and the ultimate report is often published on governmental or specialist society web sites. However, it is extremely difficult to access such information if the existence of that document is not known or suspected. Internet search engines may well reveal a number of documents from around the world that are relevant to a given area of interest, but no information is available as to whether these documents are regarded as definitive or even helpful to the situation to which they refer.

For an individual interested in reviewing the work undertaken by others around the world on a given subject, it is undoubtedly true that these documents are digitally available and downloadable and, as a consequence, so much more available than was the case previously. However, as they are never peer-reviewed, there is little option for the researcher other than to collect and read the documents themselves to gain an insight into their value.

So how is the work of a specialist group to be made more usefully available? Certainly documents may be printed and circulated to libraries, but on the Internet these are only available if sought out and assessed by all readers individually.

An alternative taken by only a few is to extract the main points and report the publication in a peer-reviewed journal. There are difficulties with this approach, particularly as many journals are not naturally interested in and do not seem to appreciate the value of papers of this type as they are not perceived to represent the results of original work. Such a point of view is often far wide of the mark as these

documents represent a huge investment in the analysis and reporting of original work and have the status of review articles by expert groups commensurately with a lower Cochrane level of evidence.

My interest in this issue stems from involvement in two related pieces of work that have not appeared in a peer-reviewed journal,^{1,2} and from being asked to review the paper published in this Journal about the AUSBURN-PLAN, which describes the work undertaken to create a major incident plan for mass burn casualties in Australia.³

A question remains as to how a précis of what might be a lengthy document might be most valuably presented. Should it give some indication of the value of the work to the wider community? This could be a description as how useful the findings or recommendations are felt to be beyond the confines of the original target readership.

It seems appropriate not to waste such work and to support the publication of précis articles in peer-reviewed journals so as to make it possible to be aware of and reference that document as part of the ongoing and permanent record for the benefit of research worldwide.

Alternatively, is there no interest in the creation of a new group of peer-reviewed publications that might be only available digitally and that maintain a collection of such

pieces of work on a single site where the applicability and value of such documents can be objectively reported?

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Provenance and peer review

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