

Introducing the World Wide Web

by Patrick O'Carroll, Co-Director 1996-1997, Director 1997-1998



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In 1995, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) assigned me to the Northwest Center for Public Health Practice (NWCPHP) to develop informatics training for CDC's public health advisors. These advisors had been given the job of developing nationally interoperable statewide immunization registries—an undertaking only slightly less complex than the Apollo moon mission of the 1960s. NWCPHP was selected because of its well-established training infrastructure and its close connection with the practice community.

The idea was for me to develop a week-long informatics training course in close collaboration with state and local practice colleagues, and then to deliver it as a special track at the Summer Institute for Public Health Practice (page 4). A year or so later, Jim Gale asked if I would help him co-direct NWCPHP. In 1997 I became full-time director and stayed in that post until I returned to CDC headquarters in 1999.

The reader will remember the 1990s as that brief period between when dinosaurs roamed the earth and when essentially everyone on the planet acquired a Facebook account. When I first arrived in the Northwest, many states were still actively developing closed (non-Internet-based) statewide computer networks; most local public health practitioners did not use e-mail; and managers were busy deciding which few of their employees might be trusted with access to the World Wide Web. Needless to say, it was an exciting time to be in informatics.

One of my favorite memories of this period is traveling across Washington with colleagues from the Washington State Department of Health and the University of Washington Health Sciences Library, proselytizing about the information and communication wonders of Web access. After one such session, in which we demonstrated how to use a Web browser to find public health information, a local health department employee told us she thought the Web looked wonderful—but would it be possible, first, to help her log into her e-mail account? It appears that contractors had

recently installed the department's first-ever e-mail system, but neglected to give anyone at the department their password. Early days, indeed.

During my tenure as director, public health informatics became a major component of the NWCPHP along with training development and delivery, and outreach to the practice community (e.g., managing the practicum assignments of students at state and local health departments). Since that time, of course, public health informatics has grown into its own domain, and now the University of Washington can boast one of the country's premier Centers for Public Health Informatics (www.cphi.washington.edu).

Today, the nature of NWCPHP's projects continue to grow and evolve as it takes on new responsibilities related to public health practice research. As to the future, I can only say that I expect the many projects of the NWCPHP will always reflect its fundamental purpose: to serve as a bridge between the academic and practice worlds of public health, and to bring the power of a great academic institution to bear on improving public health in the Pacific Northwest.

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