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He@lth Information on the Internet

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Editorial: Wikipedia

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Wikipedia is the free, online encyclopaedia that anyone can edit. The characteristics that make Wikipedia stand out are that its content is written collaboratively by volunteers, it is accessible for free and can be re-used under the GNU Free Documentation License (GFDL)

A main theme underpinning and interweaving through the Internet phenomenon is that of co-operation and freedoms. Some manifestations of this are the open source and free software movements, and open access to literature. Another manifestation, currently in the news at the time of writing,¹ is Wikipedia <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Main_Page>. Wikipedia is the free, online encyclopaedia that anyone can edit. Looking for information on Wikipedia results in an encyclopaedia entry <<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia>>. The benefits of a Web-based encyclopaedia are immediately obvious, as the reader can simply click onto related topics through hypertext links. The characteristics that make Wikipedia stand out are that its content is written collaboratively by volunteers, it is accessible for free and can be re-used under the GNU Free Documentation License (GFDL) <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/GNU_Free_Documentation_License>.

Wikipedia was founded by Jimmy Wales and is now sponsored by the non-profit Wikimedia Foundation

based in the USA. As well as Wikipedia, the Foundation also supports a number of other projects, e.g. Wiktionary <www.wiktionary.org/>, a free dictionary, and Wikinews <http://en.wikinews.org/wiki/Main_Page>, a free news source written by the people themselves. Wikipedia contains about 1.6 million articles, and has active editions in about 100 languages. The site receives about 60 million hits a day. Wikimania 2005 <http://wikimania.wikimedia.org/wiki/Main_Page>, the First International Wikimedia Conference, was held in Frankfurt on 4–8 August 2005. 'A primary goal of the conference was to bring together the communities of the various Wikimedia projects and to help them improve their

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understanding of one another.'

Anyone can write an entry in Wikipedia, or edit an existing entry. This is achieved through the use of software called a wiki. '*A wiki is a web application that allows users to add content, as on an Internet forum, but also allows anyone to edit the content.*'

Agreement on content is intended to be reached by consensus. However, this can mean that articles on controversial subjects can be continually re-edited by one side or other of the argument. Additionally, entries can be vandalised. There are policies about content <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia:Policies_and_guidelines>, e.g. the writer must maintain a neutral viewpoint and ideas must have already been published and cannot be original research. The policy requires that '*views should be given weight equal to their popularity*'. This has been criticised as it can lead to discredited or offensive views being placed in Wikipedia. There are dispute

resolution procedures and some controls, e.g. administrators, a small group of trusted volunteers, have the power to prevent articles from being edited, to delete articles, or to block users from editing. Allowing anyone to make entries leads to the biggest criticism about Wikipedia; that it lacks authority and entries can be of poor quality.

Use of GFDL protects the content and ensures that Wikipedia can remain a free content encyclopaedia. GFDL is a copyleft license for documents. Content from Wikipedia can be copied and re-used in other publications. But these publications, in turn, must carry the GFDL.

Does Wikipedia have any value in the health field? Does its open input approach go against the idea of evidence-based content? Perhaps readers of *HIOTI* could share their experiences of using Wikipedia? Choosing a few topics at random, there are entries for: evidence-based

medicine, health economics, information, the Internet, the National Health Service, Northumbria University, nutrigenomics, obesity, primary care, the Royal Society of Medicine. A recent call on the MEDLIB-L listserv asked for help in improving a new entry on medical libraries. The entries listed above vary in size and complexity from simple, brief, straightforward factual statements to larger discussions of a topic, presenting various arguments and giving links to many other sections within Wikipedia as well as references to external literature and information sources.

If you want to participate in the Wikipedia project go to:

<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia:Community_Portal>.

Reference

1. Didson S. *Worldwide Wikimania*. *Guardian Online*, 11 August 2005, p 24,23 <www.guardian.co.uk/online/story/0,,1546162,00.html>.

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Searching the Internet for health information

<www.harrisinteractive.com/harris_poll/index.asp?PID=584>

The results of a Harris Poll in the US into people's use of the Internet for health information has recently been published. Though the percentage of online adults who have ever searched for health information is slightly down from last year's poll (2005, 72%; 2004, 74%) the actual number has risen (2005, 117 million; 2004, 111 million). This is because the total number of Internet users has been increasing (2005, 75% of all adults; 2004: 69%). 'However, compared to last year, online adults appear to be searching the Internet for health-related information more frequently.'

CRD RSS feed

The **Centre for Reviews and Dissemination (CRD)** Web site now has an RSS feed

<www.york.ac.uk/inst/crd/rss.htm>

This 'contains information on new publications, improvements to the CRD website, the latest Hitting the Headlines story, new additions to the CRD databases and much more'.