Disease Surveillance in Cyberspace

Researchers at Children's Hospital Boston and Harvard Medical School have created a new tool to track infectious disease outbreaks, online. This data-mining project called **HealthMap** scours news services and online discussion forums, pooling information about emerging health threats worldwide.

The system characterizes disease outbreak reports by (*a*) identifying disease and location; (*b*) determining relevance—namely, whether a given report refers to any current outbreak; and (*c*) grouping similar reports together while removing exact duplicates. Color coded icons are used to depict disease outbreaks on a world map. You can select the country or city or province you want to scan as well as the disease you want to monitor. You can even decide which data sources you want information from. This technology seems to pick up outbreaks much before government and health agencies realize they are threats. Currently the program is monitoring health related stories, reports and discussions in 200 countries. Developing countries which have unreliable or slow public health monitoring systems will find it a boon (*Scientific American; 8 July 2008*).

Medical Research in India

"In 1980 India was light years ahead of China in volume and breadth of published research. For two decades India's research output production stagnated. China's research output increased exponentially. Presently China outperforms India substantially both in quality and quantity (as measured by the impact factor of research output). The gap is widening and shows no signs of abating, if present Indian research policies are continued." says RN Kostoff in an article in Technological Forecasting and Social Change.

According to the *Index Medicus* in 1998, globally 416,561 articles were published of which India's share was only 0.714% (2974 articles). Many medical colleges in India do not even publish a single paper in a year. Why? Lack of infrastructure, money and trained manpower are leading culprits. The gap between what is known and what is taught adversely affects research. Faculty, and in consequence the students are unexposed to the latest tools in biomedical research, and lack confidence in developing research projects. And while funding agencies are willing, there are no takers.

In the next five years the biotechnology market in India is expected to be US $ 5 billion creating 1 million jobs through products and services. Medical and health related biotechnology would account for 60% of the growth through vaccines, diagnostics and biopharmaceuticals. For these reasons India will have to develop a strong base for translational research - especially clinical trials. There is an urgent need for restructuring of medical education and research to meet these challenges. (*J Postgrad Med 2008; 54: 176-179*).

Therapeutic Blogging

The fervour, ardour, enthusiasm and zeal of bloggers are catching people's attention. Now scientists are excited about its medical benefits. Besides its use as a stress coping mechanism, several physiological changes have been noted. Improvement in sleep, memory and boosting of immune functions are being now documented. Viral loads in AIDS patients have been studied as well as speed in recovery after surgery, both with positive results. A study in the February issue of the Oncologist reports that cancer patients who engaged in expressive writing just before treatment felt markedly better, mentally and physically, as compared with patients who did not. An interesting explanation is the placebo theory of suffering. Humans are social animals with a range of pain related behaviors. One of them is complaining. Blogging serves as a neat alternative. (*Scientific American; May 2008*).

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