

WHO's plan for Internet health domain halted

At its meeting in Los Angeles in mid-November the board of the Internet Corporation for Assigned Names and Numbers (ICANN), the body that manages the labels or "domains" people use to identify their Internet sites, did not give the go-ahead to a WHO proposal for a new "top-level" domain for health. If accepted, the proposal, WHO believes, would have made it easier for people to find reliable health information on the Web.

Top-level domains are the three-letter labels that come at the end of an Internet site's address and denote the type of activity of the site owner. Up to now there had been only seven top-level domains, and they had reigned unchallenged over the past two decades. The three commonest top-level domains — ".com" (commercial firms), ".net" (networking companies) and ".org" (non-profit organizations) — are used by more than 24 million sites (vs only 7000 in 1992 and an expected 160 million by 2003).

ICANN decided in June to open the gates to proposals for new top-level domains. It received 47 applications, covering a variety of sites. Each applicant has to pay a US\$ 50 000 fee but, if accepted, can collect fees from anyone registering a web site on its domain. At its meeting, the ICANN board decided to accept seven new top-level domains identifying businesses, business cooperatives, information, the aviation industry, museums, professionals and individuals. At this writing, the reasons for ICANN's failure to accept WHO's proposal for a ".health" top-level domain are not known. Apparently, the board did not formally reject the proposal but set it aside for later consideration, together with more than 100 others.

WHO issued a statement reiterating its conviction that "the quality and standard of health information on the Internet can only benefit from a ".health" top-level domain". It stated its intention to continue to try and achieve this objective.

WHO's proposed ".health" domain would be restricted: that is, its use would be confined to those agreeing to abide by certain rules and standards agreed upon after wide consultation between WHO

and other players in the health arena. The domain's "sponsor", in this case WHO, would have responsibility to check on whether applicants or users of the domain were providing health information up to the agreed standards.

"The idea," WHO's Joan Dzenowagis told the *Bulletin*, "is to make it easier for Internet users to find trustworthy information on health. There are currently about 10 000 sites on health and the user has no way of telling how reliable the information on them is. At the same time we want to raise the overall standards and protect people from misleading or even dangerous information on health."

Dr Dzenowagis, who first came up with the idea for a ".health" domain, is a scientist with WHO's Department of Health Information Management and Dissemination. ■

John Maurice, *Bulletin*

A second WHO region declared polio-free

On October 29, a panel of independent experts meeting in Japan declared WHO's Western Pacific Region free of poliomyelitis. The declaration, made by the region's commission for the certification of polio eradication, signifies that no indigenous cases — as distinct from imported cases — of the disease have occurred over the past three years. The last case in the region was that in a 15-month-old girl in Cambodia, paralysed by the disease in March 1997.

China, the biggest country in the region, last year reported a case of polio in its remote Qinghai province, that turned out not to be indigenous but due to an imported virus — imported in all probability from northern India. A major emergency operation to prevent its spread from this case cost the Chinese government and donor agencies about US\$ 14 million.

With its 37 countries accounting for a quarter of the world's population, the Western Pacific now joins the 800 million inhabitants of WHO's Region of the Americas — declared polio-free in 1994 — in leading the march towards global certification of eradication of the disease, set for 2005. The European Region, which has reported no new cases in almost two

years, is expected to add its 51 countries and nearly 900 million inhabitants to the polio-free club in just over a year. More than half of the world's population will then be officially free of the disease, leaving 20 countries, mainly in Africa — West and Central, and the Horn of Africa — and parts of Asia, still striving to rid themselves of the virus.

Massive immunization campaigns are under way to vaccinate more than 200 million children in Afghanistan, Bangladesh, India, Nepal and Pakistan, and about 70 million children in 17 countries in Africa where poliovirus is still circulating.

Since WHO launched the global drive to eradicate polio in 1988, cases have dropped steadily year by year from an estimated 350 000 in 1988 to 7094 reported in 1999 and only 1481 reported so far this year, as of this writing. ■

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