

Our journal launches its own interactive website

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For *Revista Panamericana de Salud Pública*/*Pan American Journal of Public Health* (*RPSP/PAJPH*) (successor since 1997 to the *Boletín de la Oficina Sanitaria Panamericana* and *Bulletin of the Pan American Health Organization*), the new millenium has brought singular achievements. Since 2000, article submissions to *RPSP/PAJPH* have increased by 58.5%, and, according to reports of journal usage through the Internet, the number of article downloads from the web rose by 87% between 2003 and 2005. Feedback from readers and authors points to increasing satisfaction with the journal's contents, specific articles have made headlines worldwide, and international awards have been bestowed on several research papers published in the journal in recent years. As a crowning achievement, in April of 2005 the Institute for Scientific Information in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, made a decision to index the *RPSP/PAJPH* in Current Contents and the Social Sciences Citation Index, two of its prestigious biomedical databases. The decision was based on citation analysis and on the journal's significant impact factor. Clearly, such consistent achievements are not fortuitous; they are the result of a focused, continuous effort to publish quality materials that insightfully address the public health issues of greatest concern in the American Region today. The editorial team of *RPSP/PAJPH* is firmly committed to serving the interests of the public health community of readers and authors in the Region, and to this end it is in the process of introducing major changes in the way the journal can be accessed, in the way its contents are conveyed, and in the mechanism for submitting articles and reviews. Hopefully, these changes will also expedite all internal processes and make for smoother, faster peer review and for a shortened interval from manuscript receipt to publication.

Beginning in January 2006, the *RPSP/PAJPH* will have its own website (<http://journal.paho.org/>), which will provide access, free of cost, to current and former issues in full text. Free online access to *RPSP/PAJPH* has been available since 1998 through SciELO Salud Pública, a collection of online public health journals assembled by the Latin American and Caribbean Center on Health Sciences Information (BIREME). However, the new website will be much more than just another place where journal contents can be read and downloaded. Instead, it will be, first and foremost, an interactive forum where readers can address comments and questions to the authors of the papers published and engage in scholarly debate with them and other experts. Internet connectivity and instantaneous web communications have introduced a new paradigm in the way scientific information is transmitted. The traditional system in which authors submit papers, peers pass judgment, authors comply, editors query, authors respond, and a paper gets published as the static product of a closed, vertical process is being superseded by a model in which open, instantaneous dialogue between readers and authors of a published paper "extends" the review process beyond publication and makes it essentially interactive. Real-time communication between members of the research community enriches the published paper and encourages scientific rigor and accountability on the part of authors for the research methods used and the results presented. We thus highly encourage readers to take advantage of the interactive feature provided with each article to engage in this type of professional dialogue. As the website develops over the next few months, we envision introducing the capability for open, Region-wide discussions on priority issues in public health, with moderation by renowned experts. The website will thus serve to bring together the entire public health community of the Americas in a fluid, dynamic, continuous academic exchange that will set a precedent in the Region.

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For the next several months the website will be a work in progress. At launching it will contain all issues from 2003 to the present; older issues dating back to 1997 will be added in the short run. Other features will be incorporated over time. We encourage readers and authors to provide us with regular feedback through another interactive feature provided for this purpose on the website. Such feedback will help us to improve our practices and will give authors and readers an opportunity to help us shape the website on an ongoing basis.

In addition to interactive capabilities, the website will feature a secure and confidential web-based manuscript submission system known as Manuscript Central™, developed by ScholarOne, Inc., that will facilitate the paper and review submission process and allow authors to check on the status of their manuscripts directly whenever they wish. By expediting peer review and editing, Manuscript Central will quicken publication. It will also lower costs by eliminating all dependence on the postal system and reducing paperwork. System instructions will appear in English only, but authors and reviewers will receive personalized E-mails in Spanish or English depending on their native language (Spanish for Portuguese speakers). While users get accustomed to the system, our editorial office will be happy to provide as much assistance with its use as necessary. We will begin to rely on Manuscript Central exclusively for all submissions beginning in late January 2006.

The new website will offer direct links to materials in full text in pdf for selective downloading. It will also provide links to just the abstracts and synopses of all research articles, "Current Topics", and "Opinion and Analysis" pieces, both in the language of publication and in translation to a second language. Readers will be able to search the site by topic, author, article title, or date of publication, eliminating the need for long and tedious archival searches. They will also be able to register for monthly table of contents alerts. A bibliometric feature will identify the most downloaded papers, and a link to them will be provided. With each article there will also be a link to materials on related topics that have been published in the journal in the past, and links to reference materials of interest to the academic community will be added over time. These are, in essence, some of the functions that we seek to build into RPSP/PAJPH's new interactive website.

This may be a good time to focus on some of the advantages that come with electronic dissemination of biomedical journals. While readers enjoy immediate access to quality scientific information, authors gain much wider exposure for their research and more citation opportunities, leading to greater professional recognition and academic rewards. The most striking evidence of what on line exposure can do comes from the *Journal of Postgraduate Medicine*, an Indian quarterly publication that has been in existence since 1955. After making its contents freely available electronically in 2001, the journal vastly increased its visibility and impact factor and experienced a five-fold increase in article submissions. In fact, more than 60 per cent of the journal's citations have occurred after 2001 (1). *Calicut Medical Journal* and *Internet Health*, both open access journals that are published exclusively on line, also outrank many non-electronic journals in the number of downloads and citations (2). Similarly, we have every expectation that by disseminating the RPSP/PAJPH through its own interactive website, in addition to SciELO Salud Pública and Ingenta, we will enhance the journal's visibility, improve its impact factor, raise its prestige, and attract better papers.

Limited Internet connection capabilities in developing parts of the world, including Latin America and the Caribbean, have generated fears that electronic dissemination of research results will widen the information gap between rich and poor countries. The results of studies are inconclusive and are beset by the inaccuracies inherent in measuring Internet usage. There is

ample evidence, however, that over the past decade Latin America has experienced a boom in Internet connectivity as a result of national and international initiatives, including funding by the World Bank (3). In fact, in terms of the number of Internet users it has outpaced the rest of the world, with Argentina, Brazil, Chile, and Venezuela in the lead (3–8). While the population at large still lacks the Internet connectivity enjoyed by a relatively large proportion of the inhabitants of developed nations, academic institutions, hospitals, libraries, and government agencies in Latin American countries, particularly Argentina, Brazil, Colombia, and Peru, belong to large national scholarly Internet networks that are freely accessible to the scientific community. Concurrently, electronic-only scholarly journals appear to be proliferating in Latin America, particularly in the humanities, while the print publishing industry may be declining due to material constraints, high production costs, and low profit margins for publishers (2, 3, 5). There is even speculation that in less developed countries the electronic publishing model may eventually displace traditional publishing in printed format (5). But regardless of the fate of Internet publishing in Latin America, we will continue to print the *RPSP/PAJPH* for as long as resources permit.

While our authors stand to profit individually from the greater exposure our new journal website will afford them, it is the Latin American and Caribbean public health research community as a whole that will benefit most. Greater exposure through the website offers Latin American and Caribbean public health professionals an unprecedented opportunity to overcome the traditional barriers to dissemination that exist in less developed parts of the world. It can also help redress inequities in the distribution of research results and increase the availability of biomedical information for those who cannot afford a subscription to the printed journal. Most of all, it will create a sense of community and collective scholarship among public health professionals in the Region. We therefore hope that through the widened distribution and ready access that result from making the *RPSP/PAJPH* available electronically at no charge through its new, interactive website, we are ultimately helping strengthen research capacity in less developed countries of Latin America and the Caribbean.

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