

## Spotlight

# Using the internet to train physicians on MDR-TB

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An article from the HDN Key Correspondent Team

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Sub-Saharan Africa is grappling with the resurgence of tuberculosis (TB) and multi-drug resistant (MDR) strains of the disease and there is an urgent need for physicians and other health workers to adapt to new ways of handling the emerging crisis.

Learning these new techniques, however, requires taking time off work, which would have a negative impact on communities in developing countries that are already struggling to access health-care services.

But the announcement of a new free online course at the ongoing 38th Union World Conference on Lung Health in Cape Town appears to have raised some hope.

The course in tackling MDR-TB will be offered by the World Medical Association (WMA) and is designed to help physicians learn to diagnose, prevent and treat cases of MDR-TB. It can be accessed via the WMA website or through the Norwegian Medical Association (details below).

"This new course provides physicians with the latest international guidelines and treatment protocols for MDR-TB care in their daily work. It will allow physicians to receive credits as part of their continuing medical education program," WMA Secretary General Dr Otmar Kloiber announced at the conference.

With an educational grant from drug company Eli Lilly, the WMA developed the course in collaboration with the Foundation for Professional Development of the South African Medical Association and the Norwegian Medical Association. The project is being co-coordinated by the German Medical Association.

According to the site, the course "aims to facilitate self-study by medical practitioners of contemporary, evidence-based standards for diagnosis and clinical management of MDR-TB in a variety of geographical, economic and social settings." It is based on new guidelines from the WHO on the management of MDR-TB and will allow physicians to train online at their own pace. While it is now only available in English, the course will be translated into Spanish, French and Chinese.

According to Kloiber, the decision to develop the course followed a successful pilot scheme among physicians in South Africa. By the time the course was launched in March this year, 70 doctors had enrolled.

"Of these, 40 doctors completed the course by the end of August and on average they took four weeks to complete the course. The doctors were issued with certificates," Kloiber said.

But it remains to be seen if physicians from developing countries will benefit from the course

given the low levels of internet access in some areas. It is important to remember that there are three pre-conditions for internet use: First, you need a phone/internet connection; a computer with a modem; and' last but not least, electricity.

For many people, access to electricity is limited as many developing countries are without a stable power-supply system. There are frequent power failures in urban centres in some states and a total lack of power in many rural areas.

In Uganda, for instance, power is rationed because demand has exceeded supply. This is exacerbated by an unreliable distribution network, which has also been vandalized by people struggling financially.

A telephone line is often vital for internet connections, but 80 percent of the world's population does not have one or access to one. For countries without direct internet access the costs of getting connected are especially high.

But Dr Kloiber says there is a solution to these problems. "Plans are also underway to make available a handbook version of the course next year. We are also planning to put together a CD-ROM which will supplement the small time that a physician will spend on the internet."

Details of the course can be found here:

<http://www.wma.net>

<http://lupin-nma.net>

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