HOW THE RESEARCH WAS DEVELOPED

A Chronology

1981 - At an IDRC workshop on computer-based conferencing, a participant delivers a paper on the concept of using a low earth orbit communications satellite to help developing countries bridge the information gap.

1982 - Two non-profit organizations - Volunteers in Technical Assistance and the Radio Amateur Satellite Corporation - join forces to test the concept. IDRC funds a demonstration of this experiment in 1985.

1988 - A representative of the International Physicians for the Prevention of Nuclear War (IPPNW), a Nobel Prize-winning organization, discusses with IDRC staff the idea of using a low-cost communications satellite system to address the growing information gap in current health information in developing countries.

1989 - IPPNW forms Satellife to pursue the concept. Over the next several years, Satellife develops the technical aspects. In 1991 IDRC funds the research project, “HealthNet: Satellite Communications Research for Development.”


WHAT IS IDRC?

Through funding of scientific research in Africa, Asia, Latin America, the Caribbean, and Canada, the International Development Research Centre (IDRC) helps communities in the developing world find solutions to problems related to health, technology, food, social and economic policy, information and communication, and the environment. Created by the Parliament of Canada in 1970, IDRC supports research projects that address the challenges of sustainable and equitable development.

Science in ACTION

is a brochure series profiling IDRC projects worldwide. IDRC-funded research uses science and technology to help identify practical, appropriate solutions to problems in developing countries.

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AN ELECTRONIC LIFELINE

New satellite technology is helping health professionals in Africa and other regions access the most up-to-date medical information.

THE FACTS ABOUT THE GLOBAL "INFORMATION GAP"

African health care professionals often work in difficult conditions where basic services such as mail delivery, telex and fax do not always function and are very expensive.

Poor health care can result from a lack of good information - planning is done without enough facts, decisions are based on outdated information, and research is in danger of being irrelevant or unnecessary.

A SOLUTION

HealthNet

- HealthNet is a telecommunications system funded by IDRC and others that uses low-earth-orbit satellites for the exchange and transfer of health-related information in the developing world. The satellites pick up and deliver electronic messages transmitted from authorized ground stations. A ground station consists of a personal computer, a radio, and an antennae.

- Users are able to communicate with other health professionals on issues of medical concern.

- Ground stations are operating in 18 countries so far: Australia, Brazil, Cameroon, Canada, Congo, Cuba, Ethiopia, Gambia, Ghana, Kenya, Mali, Mozambique, Sudan, Tanzania, Uganda, USA, Zambia, and Zimbabwe.

- Medical publications are electronically distributed on HealthNet. These include HealthNet News - a weekly newsletter featuring summaries, abstracts, and articles with current medical information - and AIDS Bulletin, highlighting the latest developments in the HIV/AIDS crisis.

- HealthNet was created by SatelLife, a non-profit organization based in Cambridge, Massachusetts. Memorial University in St. John's, Newfoundland is a partner in the project.

HEALTHNET IS MAKING A DIFFERENCE...

"Establishing reliable communications may be one of the most important priorities for improving health care in Africa."

Dr. Gottlieb Monekosso, Director, World Health Organization's Regional Office for Africa

- When a cholera epidemic broke out in Zambia, a local medical librarian asked for information on the subject from her partner librarian at the University of Florida. A subsequent issue of HealthNet News focused on cholera.

- The African Medical Librarians Bulletin, distributed through HealthNet, highlights indigenous research material - information that was previously difficult or completely impossible to obtain.

A CANADIAN PARTNER

Dr. A. M. House, Faculty of Medicine, Memorial University, St. John's, is a pioneer in the area of telemedicine. Much of his work centres on improving health and education communication for isolated communities in Newfoundland. Memorial University is collaborating in the HealthNet project under the leadership of Dr. House.

Canada's Memorial University is the Canadian "gateway" for the HealthNet project. Messages that originate in Canada are sent to the university via conventional electronic mail for transfer to the satellite.

Memorial's Health Sciences Library is twinned with the Medical Library at Muhimbili University College of Health Sciences in Tanzania.