

A Digital Divide: Assessing the information needs and use of nurses from an Oregon county public health department

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Increasing emphasis is placed on the use of computer technology to improve information transfer in public health practice. However, electronic information resources available to public health professionals frequently are underutilized. To better understand the information needs and use of the public health workforce, semi-structured interviews were conducted with 13 public health nurses from a county public health department in rural Oregon. Methods: The author conducted onsite interviews with school nurses, visiting nurses, clinic nurses, a nurse practitioner, a nursing supervisor and a health department director. The interviews were transcribed and analyzed through a constant comparative method. Items pertaining to information generated, sought and used in carrying out work related duties were assessed. Results: Preliminary analysis of responses from 13 interviews indicates that public health nurses with a common professional background have different information needs based on their position, tasks and responsibilities. Lack of access to computers, email, the Internet and technical support were identified as major barriers to information seeking and sharing. The nurses interviewed appeared comfortable with computers and used personal computers at home to access email and the Internet. However, the paucity of computers with Internet access prevented use of online resources at work. Irrelevant content and unfriendly user interfaces were also viewed as contributing to the underutilization of online clinical resources. Conclusion: Semi-structured interviews with county public health nurses identified several barriers to the use of electronically available information. These obstacles should be eliminated to guarantee that public health nurses have timely access to accurate, up-to-date information.