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Presentation of the RAFT project

Continuing education of healthcare professionals is a key element of the quality and efficiency of a health system. In developing countries, this activity is usually limited to capitals, and delocalized professionals do not have access to such opportunities, or to didactic material adapted to their needs. This limits the interest of such professionals to remain active in the periphery, where they are most needed to implement effective strategies for prevention and first-line healthcare.

Telemedicine tools enable the communication and sharing of medical information in electronic form, and thus facilitate access to remote expertise. A physician located far from a reference center can thus consult its colleagues remotely in order to resolve a difficult case, follow a continuous education course over the Internet, or access medical information from digital libraries or knowledge bases. These same tools can also be used to facilitate exchanges between centers of medical expertise: health institutions of a same country as well as across borders.

The potential of these tools is particularly evident in countries where specialists are few, and where distances and the quality of the infrastructure hinder the movement of physicians or patients. Many of the French-speaking African countries are confronted with these problems.

Since 2000, the Geneva University Hospitals have been involved in coordinating the development of a network for eHealth in Africa (the RAFT, Réseau en Afrique Francophone pour la Télémedecine, <http://raft.hcuge.ch>), first in Mali, then in Mauritania, Morocco, Cameroon, and, since 2004, in Burkina-Faso, Senegal, Tunisia, Ivory Coast, and Madagascar.

The core activity of the RAFT is the webcasting of interactive courses targeted to physicians and other care professionals, the topics being proposed by the partners of the network. These sessions put the emphasis on knowledge sharing across institutions, usually in the form of presentations and dialogs between experts in different countries. The technology used for the webcasting works with an internet connection, a Java-enabled Web browser (e.g., Internet Explorer or Mozilla) and the free RealPlayer software. A bandwidth of 30 kbits/second, the speed of a basic telephone modem, is sufficient, and enables the participation of remote hospitals.

Other activities of the RAFT network include visioconferences, teleconsultations, collaborative knowledge bases development, support for medical laboratories quality control (in collaboration with the Swiss Center for Quality Control), and the evaluation of the use of telemedicine in rural areas (via satellite connections) in the context of multisectorial development (e.g., <http://www.dimmbal.ch>).

Finally, a strong emphasis is put on the development of capacities for the creation, maintenance, and publication of quality medical didactic contents. Specific courses (remote and face-to-face) are organized for the national coordinators of the network to develop these competencies, with the help of the Health-On-the-Net Foundation (<http://www.hon.ch>).

To know more about these projects: <http://raft.hcuge.ch>

