

Electronic Connection: Report From Toronto: HUSITA8

Contributed by Marshall L. Smith, Ph.D.

This past August, the eighth international conference of Human Services Information Technology Applications (HUSITA: <http://www.husita.org/>) was held in Toronto, Ontario, Canada. According to the conference program, "HUSITA is an international virtual association dedicated to promoting the ethical and effective use of Information Technology (IT) to better serve humanity." In particular, this meeting explored information technology and diversity in human services with an aim toward promoting strength through difference. Sessions ranged from distance education to online delivery of services to the use of IT in the solving of crimes. {mosgoogle right}

A keynote address was given by Paul Gillespie, Cybercrime Director-in-Residence, University of Ontario, Institute of Technology. He described a frustrated e-mail that was sent to Bill Gates of Microsoft, essentially saying that the "bad guys are winning, and that law enforcement was not able to keep up with crimes involving the victimization of children through the Internet." Microsoft responded immediately to the Toronto Police Department, putting top programmers to work on the problem. The result is the Child Exploitation Tracking System (CETS: http://www.infoworld.com/article/05/04/07/HNmstools_1.html?COMPUTER%20FORENSICS), which links together the "database silos" of many law enforcement agencies around the globe that had previously not been able to talk to each other. Immediately, fragments of information stored in each of these database silos began to come together and form coherent leads to exploiters who had previously been untrackable. For example, undecipherable writing in an out-of-focus image posted by a perpetrator on the Internet led nowhere until it was posted to the CETS network. Very quickly, similar images were located in other databases that matched the style of the first image, leading eventually to an arrest and conviction. CETS is in its infancy, but is already proving to be a powerful force in the fight against child exploitation.

A follow-up survey of distance education efforts of social work schools and programs found that not only is social work practice being taught using the Internet, but it is achieving effective learning rates among students. A previous survey had found that the highest frequency of use of online courses is to teach social work practice—exactly the area that most people believe cannot be taught in this manner. Obviously, more research is needed.

Calls for a social work wiki were raised. We are in need of a way to collect, categorize, refine, and distribute social work knowledge. The tools commonly used by Wikipedia, for example, could easily be used by the social work profession to catalog our evolving knowledge base. In fact, Goutham Menon, of the University of Texas at San Antonio, is working on a Social Work Education Network to accomplish this monumental task (<http://socialworkeducation.net/>). At the moment, it too is in its infancy, with 26 users signed up at the time of this writing. I hope to assist Goutham with the creation of an interactive course and degree program catalog of distance education and online social work education opportunities. It is hoped that academic programs can list and update their offerings in real time and students can use the wiki to locate courses that are already accredited to help toward progress on their BSW and MSW degree programs wherever they are enrolled. You will hear more about this soon.

One of the problems facing human services information systems up until now has been the lack of a standard way of referring to types of services, agencies, programs, and so forth. What one professional calls X therapy is called Y therapy by others. Similarly, agencies that provide preventive services may be grouped under "socialization services" in one location, and under "pre-crisis services" elsewhere. There is an emerging standard developed by the Alliance of Information & Referral Systems (AIRS: <http://www.airs.org/>) that has been used by crisis hotlines, and now the evolving "211 system." However, it does not go far enough. It does not classify the types of services provided according to psychosocial and intervention theories. It only classifies the types of agencies and services. So, Dale Fitch of the University of Michigan has been working on this task to expand the scope of the AIRS taxonomy to include social work practice knowledge. What will result, eventually, will be a universal way to agree on what to call what we do as professional social workers and therefore a way to agree on referrals we make to each other.

Lawrence Murphy is a pioneer in the use of cybercounseling via e-mail (<http://www.therapyonline.ca/about.htm>). He and his associates have worked on ways to incorporate the human touch in digital communication such that useful principles have emerged. It actually is a combination of emoticons, emphasizing the emotional content of a message in font and style, employing the strategies commonly used by Deaf people in TTY communications, and creative interpretations of the action implications of intervention strategies. Murphy and his colleagues are leading us toward an increasing intimacy in our electronic communications. Perhaps this comes as no surprise to younger professionals who have grown up with digital communication technology.

There were many more outstanding presentations that stretched the limits of IT and human services. The future is always elusive, yet in the process of coming true all the time.

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This article appears in the Fall 2007 (Vol. 14, No. 4) issue of THE NEW SOCIAL WORKER magazine. All rights reserved.