

EDITORIAL

THE FUTURE OF ORTHOPAEDICS ON THE INTERNET

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The past three years have witnessed the evolution of a phenomenon unprecedented in human history. By now I assume that most of us have at least heard of the Internet, if not begun to use this vast global resource of information and communication. For some it has become indispensable, but it continues to need critical assessment.

Meanwhile, entire industries are being turned upside down by the changes occurring throughout the world. The critics who remain entrenched in their dogmatic rejection of the changes being wrought at every level by this phenomenon are dwindling. Visionaries who are assuming the task of building the resources necessary to exploit the potential benefits of the Internet are replacing them.

Using the Internet-based orthopaedic mailing list (<http://www.mailbase.ac.uk/lists/orthopod>), an on-line international orthopaedic community was established and has been host to an interesting experiment in "virtual collaboration" over the past six months. There the Orthogate Project was born. At the recent AAOS meeting in New Orleans, on Thursday March 19th, 1998, the architects of the concept and the members of the orthopaedic mailing list met "physically" for the first time, for an evening of formal presentations and discussion.

What is the Orthogate Project? Quite simply, the goal of the project is to make every information resource you may need as an orthopaedic surgeon, allied healthcare provider, or patient available from a web browser and thus on your consultation desk. How do we plan to accomplish this goal? The founders of the Orthogate Project are now formally constructing the Internet Society of Orthopaedic Surgery and Traumatology, a worldwide co-operative effort, which will be open, independent, and self-supporting. This society will be

charged with establishing a foundation, the Orthogate Foundation, to fund and administer the research and development necessary to realise the goals of the project. It is not the intent of the project to compete with existing available electronic resources, but rather to promote those resources.

The components that will be key elements of the Orthogate Project are :

- Access to a set of definitive electronic orthopaedic textbooks — using the benefits of hypermedia and multimedia ;
- Access to and establishment of electronic orthopaedic journals : the electronic medium finally enables the concept of concurrent peer review and collaborative research and publication, as well as interactive CME offerings as part of the journal. A high quality editorial board would set a quality standard for the reader and develop an orthopaedic journal summary service using push technology ;
- An orthopaedic search engine including dedicated Medline search specifically geared to pick up valuable orthopaedic information, closely integrated with an annotated list of orthopaedic resources (Orthopaedic Web Links) ;
- A comprehensive collection of patient education materials ready to be deployed by healthcare providers the world over to better communicate the nature of our healing art and science to our patients ;
- The creation of research based subspecialty orthopaedic mailing lists
- The creation of global orthogate databases for the common good. These would include a global directory of orthopaedic surgeons, global orthopaedic opportunities (jobs, research po-

sitions, fellowships), global interactive outcomes using a standard data set, global archive of orthopaedic meetings, orthopaedic associations, orthopaedic research projects, multicenter clinical research projects co-ordinated through the internet, an archive of clinical pathways with interactive templates for training, orthopaedic software, a "one point of entry" database of information from commercial manufacturers.

In many areas of the world today, access to the Internet may be more easily obtained than copies of current orthopaedic journals and textbooks. If quality orthopaedic information were made available on the Internet, that connection could be leveraged to far greater advantage, providing access to much more information at a lesser cost. While this may simply be a convenience to some of us, clearly the implications for less-developed countries are profound.

Technically, this is all possible today. The barriers to implementation that exist are not

technical, but revolve around the economic implications of de-coupling the process of distribution of information with the process of creation of quality information. These traditional barriers must be overcome — simply because the opportunity to increase access to information and, thus raise the standard of orthopaedic care is too compelling to ignore.

Clearly, in this ambitious project, the Belgian orthopaedic community has been one of the main players. It remains to be seen whether the Belgian orthopaedic societies will continue to share this vision and support all the aspects of the project financially so that it can survive. A continuous critical assessment of what is developed will be necessary, as is the case with all scientific publications.

But as the ancient Chinese proverb states, "A journey of a thousand miles starts with a single step."

<http://www.orthogate.com>