

I listen, I learn, iPods

Ernest Hemingway once wrote, "I like to listen. I have learned a great deal from listening carefully. Most people never listen." Though it is unlikely Hemingway had cause to listen to biomedical lectures or derived great learning from hearing interviews with authors from the New England Journal of Medicine, nevertheless his wry observation remains true for the clinician: listening can result in great learning.

As compared with reading, listening has benefits of particular relevance to the busy clinician. The wide availability and low cost of good quality digital recording devices and the popularity of podcasting have led to an abundance of informational and educational audio material being made available via the internet. Undoubtedly, some of this is of dubious quality, however medical colleges, educational institutions, community organisations, and research institutes are increasingly publishing high quality material in this format.

The fact remains that appropriately useful podcasts are not necessarily easy for clinicians to access. Not everyone has an MP3 player and listening at a desktop PC is not ideal. Podcast feeds often include unnecessary or peripheral materials, while searching for files to download takes time and it can be frustratingly difficult to isolate what is needed. The Toowoomba Hospital Library has embarked on a novel approach to capture and disseminate targeted audio material for clinicians in an attempt to eliminate these barriers.

The library began with the purchase of ten Apple iPod 1GB shuffles. Each iPod was assigned to one of the clinical subject areas included in the rotations undertaken by the resident medical officers at the hospital: Anaesthetics; Emergency Medicine; Internal Medicine; Mental Health; Obstetrics and Gynaecology; Oncology and Palliative Care; Orthopaedics; Paediatrics; Renal and Cardiac; and Surgery. The iPods were then loaded with relevant audio files found by library staff. Most of the files were found through searching freely available websites, though some were purchased through the dedicated CME vendor Audio Digest. The files include lectures and debates from conferences and meetings of professional societies; journal issue summaries and interviews with article authors; interviews with prominent physicians about their research interests; continuing medical education podcasts; and radio broadcasts. All information selected is aimed at the practising clinician and much of it is equally valuable and accessible for nursing and allied health staff.

The iPods are available to registered library clients for a two week period. Users are asked to fill in a brief online survey and the feedback received has been overwhelmingly positive. Staff have appreciated the immediacy and flexibility of the iPods, as well as the opportunity to obtain information relevant to their practice that they otherwise may have missed. The subject specific nature of the iPods has ensured staff have not had to negotiate unnecessary content.

An Access database has also been constructed and populated with metadata for each of the MP3 files included. This not only helps library staff keep track of what has been downloaded, but allows the generation of descriptive lists so clients can select their own playlist. The MP3 files making up this playlist can then be transferred to a client's own player or burned to CDs which the client can keep. As well, stemming from this initial service, library staff have subsequently been asked to source further audio information on areas of particular interest to clients (eg mentoring and preceptorship), or to provide a list of relevant websites clients can explore themselves.

The project is still in its infancy, and further refinement will come through liaison between the library and the clinical community. Nevertheless, initial reception of the iPods has justified the library's belief that audio material, shrewdly selected and disseminated, can be an important component of clinician learning and development. If you are engaged in similar efforts or would simply like to learn more about this project, the authors are happy to share any insights they have.

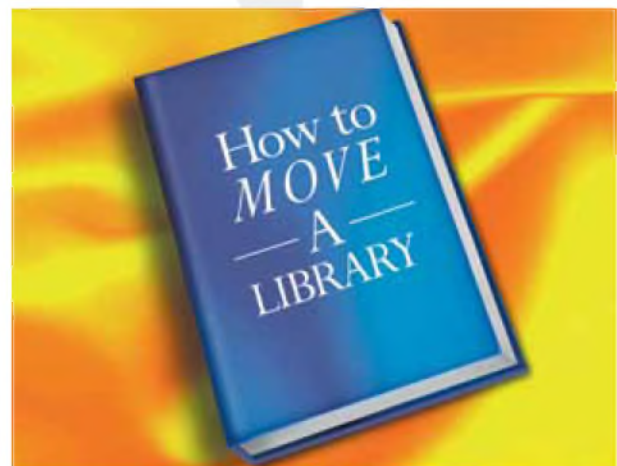
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