Editorial

The 13th World Congress on Medical and Health Informatics (Medinfo) was held in 2010 between 12 and 15 September in Cape Town, South Africa. This triennial international gathering is the official conference of the International Medical Informatics Association (IMIA) and brings together leading health informatics leaders, scientists, clinicians, researchers, vendors, developers and government and health care planners from around the globe. The conference attracted 905 submissions and resulted in a program that included 260 oral presentations, 349 posters presentations and 21 scientific demonstrations representing contributions from 58 countries. The Medinfo program covered all aspects of health informatics from traditional areas, such as hospital information systems, patient registries, nursing informatics, data integration, standards, interoperability issues and decision support, to innovative topics, such as translational bioinformatics, text mining, intelligent data analysis, emerging technologies, quality, social networking, workflow and organizational issues. The outgoing President of the IMIA, Professor Reinhold Haux, presented on health informatics challenges into the future, reinforcing that today and in the future, health care has to be considered as part of a continuous and coordinated life-time journey and not just as episodes of disease. Medical informatics has a key role to play in this paradigm shift. The new IMIA President, Professor Antoine Geissbuhler, was announced at the closing ceremony. The next Medinfo congress will take place in Copenhagen, Denmark, in September 2013.

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Scientific Program Committee, noted the high quality of the papers presented at this Medinfo, the diverse range of topics covered and their potential to impact positively in the advancement of health care on a global level.²

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The conference was officially opened by the South African Minister of Health, Dr. Aaron Motsoaledi. Dr. Motsoaledi highlighted the role that e-Health can play in meeting the strategic health challenges in South Africa – to increase life expectancy, decrease maternal and child mortality, combat human immunodeficiency virus (HIV) and acquired immunodeficiency syndrome (AIDS) and decrease the burden of diseases such as tuberculosis, and to strengthen the health system’s effectiveness.⁴ Dr. Najeeb Al-Shorbaji, the World Health Organization’s Director of Knowledge Management and Sharing, pointed to the significance of the congress being held in Africa for the first time and what that may mean for future developments across the continent. According to Dr. Al-Shorbaji, there is evidence to show that e-Health can improve the effectiveness and quality of healthcare and its contribution to equity and accessibility.⁵

A highlight of this year’s conference was the keynote presentation by Professor Marion Ball, who is a member of the US Institute of Medicine and serves on the Board of Regents of the National Library of Medicine. Professor Ball took a reflective view of the history of medical informatics and posed some major tasks looking to the future, including the importance of smarter point of care solutions that make data available when clinicians need them, and the future importance of genomics, proteomics and metabolomics to the delivery of optimized health care to all people.⁶

One of the regular highlights of the Medinfo conference is the selection of best papers, including the best student paper, which featured at the conference. The choice of the best paper at Medinfo is usually an indication of the areas where cutting-edge developments are taking place within the medical and health informatics discipline. The best student paper at the conference was awarded to Nils Daniel Forkert as lead author of a paper outlining the automatic analysis of the anatomy of arteriovenous malformations using 3D and 4D magnetic resonance angiography image sequences.⁷ Included among the finalists was a paper by Haitham Kussaibi and colleagues in France and the US, which provided a methodology to define a Clinical Document Architecture implementation guide for anatomic pathology reports, particularly in the area of cancer.⁸

The prize for best paper at Medinfo was awarded to William Tierney and the co-authors of a paper that described the experience of implementing electronic health records (EHRs) in HIV clinics in Kenya, Tanzania and Uganda. The paper reported that implementation of the EHR was undertaken in collaboration with National AIDS Control Programmes. Among the key factors contributing to their successful use and sustainability were local control of funds, collaboration with academia and the leveraging of research funds and technology support from each country.⁹

One of the pathology-related contributions to the Medinfo congress described the development of an open-source medical system in Kenya to allow pathology specimens to be accessed and viewed remotely via the internet.¹⁰ Other contributions to the congress addressed organizational and work flow issues, drawing attention not only to the innovative potential of hospital information systems and their impact on pathology services¹¹ but also the major implementation challenges involved and their effect on patient safety and quality of care.¹² Laboratory-related studies highlighted the important contribution pathology makes to the patient journey and the significant role that pathology informatics has as part of the world medical informatics community.

The outgoing President of the IMIA, Professor Reinhold Haux, presented on health informatics challenges into the future, reinforcing that today and in the future, health care has to be considered as part of a continuous and coordinated life-time journey and not just as episodes of disease.¹³ He pointed to the key role that health informatics will play in this paradigm shift. The new IMIA President, Professor Antoine Geissbuhler, was announced at the closing ceremony. The next world medical informatics Medinfo conference will take place in Copenhagen, Denmark, in September 2013.

COMPETING INTERESTS

Dr. Andrew Georgiou was a member of the Medinfo 2010 Scientific Program Committee.

REFERENCES

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