

Developing access to research evidence: the rebirth of ReFeR

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Background

The Research Findings Electronic Register (ReFeR) is a database of the findings of research studies funded by the Department of Health. Researchers prepare ReFeR records at the end of projects. ReFeR is important because it provides access to research findings in the gap between research completion and publication. Indeed, some research may never be formally published. ReFeR complements the records of ongoing and recently completed research held in the Department of Health's National Research Register. ReFeR has been available for several years as a free Internet database http://www.info.doh.gov.uk/doh/refr_web.nsf/Home?OpenForm from the NeLH home page.

In January 2004, Update Software Ltd, in collaboration with the Centre for Reviews and Dissemination, began a contract (F0826) funded by the Department of Health to develop and promote ReFeR further as an important source of research evidence to health care professionals in the NHS. This poster describes the development plans for the database.



New ReFeR Home page (<http://www.ReFeR.nhs.uk>)

1. Creating a new freely accessible public database (pilot site at <http://www.ReFeR.nhs.uk>)

A new, free web-based, public system will allow ReFeR reports to be searched and displayed in new ways. Key new features will include:

- Each ReFeR report will have a unique and permanent online web address (URL). This will allow the reports to be treated as citable articles, and will allow systems such as PubMed or the NRR to link directly to ReFeR reports.
- The reports will include hypertext links, such as links to PubMed, where possible.
- AND, OR and NOT will be available to combine searches from different fields and sections.
- Users can register to receive customised email alerts whenever new reports are published in ReFeR that match their search criteria.
- The public ReFeR will be accessible to search engine 'robots' so that users searching for information on Google, say, will find ReFeR reports

with URLs that will link directly to the report on the public ReFeR database.

- New fields will be available, including the International Standard Randomised Controlled Trial Number (ISRCTN), PubMed Identifiers and URLs for publications relating to the research.

2. Secure online authoring system

A secure web-based authoring system will enable investigators (authors) to create ReFeR reports for their projects online. To assist authors, some sections, such as title and contact name and address, will be pre-populated from the National Research Register data. The authoring system will provide:

- online, context-specific help and links to appropriate sections of Department of Health guidance notes;
- the ability for an author to cut and paste into and out of the authoring system. This facilitates offline working in word processors.
- an online spell-checker and basic data checking (e.g. testing for valid dates);
- a 'preview' window to see how a report will appear if it is published in its present format

3. Promoting ReFeR

The Centre for Reviews and Dissemination will be responsible for quality assurance and the promotion of ReFeR. Health care librarians and information staff are a key group of users and promoters of ReFeR. CRD will be publicising ReFeR through the various professional library networks. Promotion to other key users using a variety of methods, will be undertaken through groups and networks that will include the Cochrane Collaboration, National Research Register contributors, the CRD Single Contact Point network, and CHAIN.

4. Future plans

- Extending the data acquisition strategy. The system can be extended to include reports from more organisations. This opens the door for ReFeR to cover projects initiated by NHS Trusts through Department of Health support funding arrangements such as 'Priorities and Needs' funding. This development would complete the picture currently presented by the National Research Register (NRR). We will be discussing such a development with the Department of Health and representatives of NHS Trusts (such as the Research and Development Forum) as a second phase of work.
- Designing and implementing a survey of users to assess the use and usefulness of ReFeR.
- Establishing a Help Desk to support both users trying to search ReFeR and contributors to ReFeR.

Discussion

Developing ReFeR in these ways should ensure that it becomes an increasingly valuable and usable resource for the NHS.



New ReFeR search results page

Librarians are key users of ReFeR and intermediaries between ReFeR and many potential users. As well as using ReFeR to assist health care professionals to find research evidence, librarians are ideally placed to encourage researchers within their organisations to contribute research findings to the database. Research-supporting libraries need to exploit the new ReFeR to the full.



Typical ReFeR record

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