

Pharmacy enters Second Life

The European Association of Hospital Pharmacists (EAHP) is the latest pharmacy organisation to take the plunge into the virtual world Second Life. Shona Kirk pays them a visit and investigates progress with other virtual pharmacy projects.

Over the past few years interest in using internet-based virtual worlds for scientific teaching has increased. In the UK, several medical schools have created virtual learning environments simulating real medical care.¹

Last month, the European Association of Hospital Pharmacists announced that it has set up an exhibition centre in the virtual world Second Life (see background box). The centre, which is shared with the World Health Organisation, the International Pharmaceutical Federation and the American Society of Health-System Pharmacists, comprises two 'floors' where visitors can find information and links to other websites.

The ground floor of the exhibition centre contains a meeting room where users can attend and contribute to virtual meetings. There is also a poster exhibition where visitors can view posters presented at the recent EAHP congress. On first floor (which avatars have to 'fly up' to reach) visitors can view 'landmarks' which contain links to other useful healthcare sites within Second Life.

Background

Second Life is a three-dimensional virtual world launched by Linden Lab in 2003. To enter Second Life users must download the application onto their computer, register, and select an avatar (a computerised representation of themselves). Within Second Life residents can buy and sell property such as land and buildings, using real money exchanged for Linden dollars. Second Life currently has approximately 60,000 'residents' from around the world who interact with each other in real time, regardless of physical location.



The meeting room on the ground floor of the EAHP virtual office

Speaking at the recent EAHP congress, Simon Letellier, head of pharmacy services at the Saint Louis De L'Aigle Hospital, France, and a member of the EAHP website working group, explained that Second Life enables business rehearsal activity, concept prototyping and collaborative development, as well as being a tool for learning and development.

Pharmatopia

A short voyage through Second Life uncovers various other 'locations' of interest to pharmacists (see p105), although there are few that focus solely on pharmacy.

One such site is Pharmatopia, an 'island' dedicated to pharmacy education. It was set up by Monash University in Australia and nine other universities from around the world are currently involved in the project, including the schools of pharmacy at the University of London, the University of Nottingham and the University of Keele. Access is restricted to staff and students at participating universities.

Ian Bates, professor and head of educational development at the University

of London School of Pharmacy, explains that the first stage of Pharmatopia development was to develop a pharmacy community. The island has been divided into 'zones' including hospital, retail and industrial pharmacy, as well as social areas and an information zone.

The first Pharmatopia project to be completed and piloted is a manufacturing plant in the industrial zone, set up by Monash University. Students must put on white coats and safety goggles before entering the lab to prepare and test drugs, learning about tablet manufacture and formulation.

Professor Bates says: "The opportunity to develop a Second Life simulation to convey the inherent skills and knowledge associated with the tableting process allows an authentic experience with far fewer risks and significantly reduced costs. It also has the potential to enable collaboration between students both locally and internationally, while providing an engaging and immersive learning environment."

Participating universities have been invited to design and fund further

projects on Pharmatopia. The University of Nottingham plans to develop a pharmaceutical analysis laboratory in which students can practice a range of analysis techniques. "We hope to have the analysis laboratory up and running in Pharmatopia before the next intake of students in September," says Matthew Boyd, lecturer at the university.

Another new project is a sterile dispensing suite being developed by The University of London School of Pharmacy together with Monash University, in which students will learn about aseptic preparation.

Work has also started on a dispensing facility, led by The University of Queensland, in which students can practice their numeracy skills by calculating drug concentrations and dose dilutions. The University of Sydney are planning to develop a hospital orientation site for students to explore before they begin their placements, and

the University of North Carolina has replicated its hospital on Pharmatopia, including the neonatal intensive care unit.

Other useful sites

Searching for other pharmacy-related sites in Second Life can be challenging. The site is vast and not all facilities are listed in the search engine (which requires a fee). However, there are a number of other healthcare sites of interest to pharmacists. These include:

The NHS auditorium Selected NHS conferences are shown in Second Life. In 2007, the NHS summit for staff and stakeholders involved in the NHS Next Stage Review was attended by over 1000 people at London's ExCel centre, and by 40 people in Second Life. Next month the NHS is planning to host the International Virtual Association of Surgeons conference in the Second Life auditorium.

HealthInfo Island An information site funded by the US National Library of Medicine contains posters with links to many patient information websites including the Autistic Liberation Front, the Association for International Cancer Research and the American Diabetes Association.

Further information

Further information about the Second Life EAHP exhibition can be accessed at <http://eahpvirtualexpo.net/78.net> and information about Pharmatopia can be accessed at www.pharm.monash.edu.au/education/epharm/pharmatopia.html.

References

1. Stott D. Learning the second way BMJ. 2007;335:1122-23.