

Harnessing the digital sharing revolution to drive global health research

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The Global Health Network's suite of innovative free research tools can help tropical medicine researchers to collaborate, as reported in *PLOS Neglected Tropical Diseases* article, Strengthening Neglected Tropical Disease Research through Enhancing Research-Site Capacity: An Evaluation of a Novel Web Application to Facilitate Research Collaborations, Furtado et al 2014, in an evaluation of one of the Network's newest tools, [SiteFinder](#). The Global Health Network is a Bill & Melinda Gates-funded research group, with the operational team situated at the University of Oxford. The group have created a free online platform, where researchers can share best practice and build applications to facilitate their work. SiteFinder is one such application - it helps research groups in low/middle income countries promote their expertise, and helps those planning studies to find new sites with whom to work.

SiteFinder was launched in July 2013, following repeated requests from researchers for a means of finding new collaborators. Research sites reported difficulty maintaining their research capacity, as they would lose their trained staff between studies due to a lack of ongoing funding. Many researchers, particularly nurses, reported having to return to working in general practice because of difficulty with the sustainability of their research careers; they said that this was sadly very off-putting for them when considering whether to continue to work in research or conduct research outside their usual roles.

Furthermore, sites are often purpose-built for one study or one disease,

rather than utilizing existing capacity in the form of clinics and hospitals. If the study does not happen or closes prematurely, the [site](#) then often remains completely empty, with the capacity wasted. Researchers struggling to find collaborators and sponsors for their research groups reported having to spend a significant amount of time traveling to conferences and trying to make contacts, and that this time consuming task rarely bore fruit. Building the capacity and sustainability of research sites would mean that sites can build the expertise, ongoing funding, and staff to better conduct locally led research.

Meanwhile, those planning studies and seeking sites with whom to work face a further difficulty because there is no one place to find research sites, particularly small-scale sites and healthcare institutions undertaking their first studies. Discussing the problem with both parties led to the emergence of the idea of an online, interactive platform which would help each party find the other.

Built on the concept of dating website technology, SiteFinder lists research sites on one side, and research studies on the other, and suggests matches between the two. SiteFinder currently has over 120 registered research sites and around 20 studies, and uses an audit procedure to ensure quality of information. Sites report valuing the tool and the information which they access as a result of being part of SiteFinder and the wider Global Health Network.

[The Global Health Network](#) evolved from an initiative in Kenya where it was shown that sharing methods, knowledge and skills fuels research capacity development [1]. The concept has grown consistently since its launch in 2011 and has had more than 330,000 visits from over 150 countries. The Network now benefits from hundreds of articles on best practice, community discussions, events, templates, face to face workshops. Research tools are also built when demand dictates, including a hugely popular eTraining center, a Continued Professional

Development Scheme, a Process Map for tracking research initiation, and SiteFinder.

Health workers and organizations that have research facilities, or those who would like to take part in research, are invited to sign up. In addition any research groups that are planning studies, even at an early stage, can post their plans on Site-Finder and would-be collaborators can then get in touch.

More information: Furtado T, Franzen S, van Loggerenberg F, Carn G, Grahek S, et al. (2014) Strengthening Neglected Tropical Disease Research through Enhancing Research-Site Capacity: An Evaluation of a Novel Web Application to Facilitate Research Collaborations. *PLoS Negl Trop Dis* 8(11): e3225. [DOI: 10.1371/journal.pntd.0003225](https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pntd.0003225)

[1]. Clinical Research in Resource-Limited Settings: Enhancing Research Capacity and Working Together to Make Trials Less Complicated. www.plosntds.org/article/info%3Adoi%2F10.1371%2Fjournal.pntd.0000619

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