

Be Open, Act Together: the message of EAHIL 2020 Online Conference I learned from a friend



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The last days of October 2019, I received an email from my friend, Vicki Croft, a retired head of WSU¹'s Animal Health Library who I first met at ICAHIS². I think I have had the good fortune to become Vicki's friend for a variety of reasons. Here I am going to write about my recent experience related to one of these reasons.

In the email, she told me about the abstract submission for the **EAHIL2020 Conference: Be Open, Act Together** that was related to my research interests. The European Association for Health Information and Libraries organizes conferences or workshops annually for librarians and information professionals working in all health sectors around Europe and other continents. The 17th EAHIL Conference was going to take place in Lodz, Poland, on 22-26 June 2020. Although there were only three days left for the deadline of the first call, I wrote and sent a proposal on one of the conference themes: "Open Health Information". I think it was because of Vicki that I did it so quickly and took this opportunity to not only attend the conference but also present there. I remembered that once I asked Vicki to send a voice message for a meeting that I organized for LIS³ students in my previous university in Iran. She told us: "*Become professionally active; collaborate with your own library, libraries in your community, your country, or internationally; work outside your immediate discipline; learn new skills and about new resources; dare to be bold and try something new; lastly, think and act globally!*" (personal communication, Vicki Croft, in Doctor Reza Naghshineh Memorial Lecture: Information Services for Veterinary Practice. University of Tehran. Iran, December 22, 2018).

Two months after the submission, in December 20, 2019, I received an email from the International Programme Committee of the conference that my proposal has been accepted as an oral presentation for the EAHIL conference. I was excited because I was going to travel to Poland for the first time, present my ideas and experiences for the whole new peers, meet a few old friends and lots of new health information specialist across the world.

Many things changed from that day until the day I participated at the conference. The Coronavirus pandemic occurred, my PhD research at the VUW⁴ started by distance rather than on campus, and the conference was postponed to Autumn 2020 and took place as a virtual event rather than in Lodz, Poland. I felt I would miss many personal and professional opportunities which could bring me a lifelong benefits and memorable events, but I also think "I was bold and tried something new".

The Online EAHIL2020 was a large multi-session online event from 16-18 November with a virtual lobby,

¹ Washington State University

² 9th International Conference of Animal Health Information Specialist. Budapest, Hungary, June 14-17, 2018.

³ Library and Information Science

⁴ Victoria University of Wellington, New Zealand

Memories from the EAHIL 2020 Online Conference participants

Zoom meetings, Discord chat rooms and voice chat channels, a poster website, YouTube pre-record tours, Google forms, sponsors virtual exhibition, a live stream concert, and game-based learning platforms. We could also share information tidbits from the online event on our platforms like Facebook, LinkedIn and Instagram Stories. The Local Organising Committee in Lodz was mostly successful in making it highly interactive and giving the conference a similar look and feel to a physical event, however the experience was competently different from previous conferences I had attended: something new and unique in its own way.

I participated under my PhD affiliation and the VUW's School of Information Management covered the fees. Every day I sat in my own home office (in my home country, Iran) rather than conference centre for hours until the end. The conference started every day at 9 am (CET). So, I needed to be so careful with converting the time of each session to my current time zone. Usually the whole day programme ended at 11.30 pm (in my time zone) and I got really tired. I had to contend with distractions during the virtual event that aren't necessarily there for in-person conferences (e.g. emails that pop-up on my screen, or house distractions). Attendees viewed the event from many different locations and I think the scale was larger than any previous EAHIL conferences (more than 250 participants). During the greetings in virtual conferences it is common to say "Hello from [a country]". I was representing for my university in NZ; however, I was actually presenting from Iran! The coronavirus era really puts us in new situations and we need to decide and act differently according to our new norms.

This was the first time that I presented at the EAHIL conference. I was presenting on the third day of the conference in the "Open Health Information" session with Lydia Rignace from Ministry of Health of Seychelles, and Artemis Chalepliglou from Biomedical Research Foundation of the Academy of Athens. Lydia was going to demonstrate the importance of health literacy at the population level; however, unfortunately she could not join us during the online session. Artemis looked at the applicability of semantic web ontologies in the consumption of Open Science biomedical data. And my presentation was about health literacy interventions in veterinary services. My main objective was to show the impact of human-animal, and client veterinarian bonds on the outcomes of vets' prescribed information to support eHealth literacy among different groups of pet owners. My three conclusions were:

- the bond between owners and their pets has a significant influence on their behaviors to use high quality and the best available sources to seek animal health information;
- vets should make clients aware of options to find reliable sources and improve their information evaluation skills via learning opportunities (e.g. information prescriptions, or guided internet searches);
- information specialists should collaborate with animal health sectors to develop a unique animal-related health literacy measurement tool, and design interventions to improve health literacy among pet owners.

During the Q&A I received positive comments and thought-provoking questions. Heather Moberly, coordinator of veterinary information services at the Texas A&M University, and Fiona Brown, academic support librarian for veterinary medicine at the University of Edinburgh, wanted to know more about the engagement of veterinary practitioners in this study. I briefly talked about how vets were engaged in designing client handouts and prescribing online sources. We really need to think about possible ways of collaboration with animal health organisations and veterinary centres. After my presentation in the virtual coffee rooms, Jessica Langenhoff, owner of XXs2info⁵, commented about the importance of giving people an information prescription before being allowed to have a companion animal. She also provided me with a good example of the education of pet owners in the Netherlands via an initiative called the National Center for Information on Companion Animals⁶ (LCIG).

There were also some questions about reliable, up-to-date- and easy-to-understand websites for pet owners. Specially, I think we need online platforms to help pet owners navigate the stressful pandemic environment.

⁵ XXs2info (access to info) established in 2020 for providing communication and information services for healthcare sector in the Netherlands

⁶ www.licg.nl

Memories from the EAHIL 2020 Online Conference participants

Some good links and practices were shared on the Zoom chat box and Discord chat rooms. For instance, [Pet Health Pal](#), launched by Mars Petcare Science Institute, is a free digital education tool powered by Facebook (FB) Messenger about information related to pet health and ownership during COVID-19. Or [Pandemic Puppies](#) a research at the Royal Veterinary College (RVC) seeking to improve the lives of dogs, by understanding problems experienced during the purchase of a puppy. Also, on Facebook there's another initiative called "Dog during pandemic" where people offer their help with walking the dog of someone who has to stay at home because of quarantine. More general online information sources for pet owners is [LifeLearn ClientEd](#), by which the University of Tennessee provides a subscription database of 1300 articles in English and Spanish curated by veterinarians as an information supplement. And finally, the [Veterinary Partner](#), an accurate pet health information website for client education provided by the Veterinary Information Network, Inc.

It is clear that the Open Health Information session of EAHIL conference was informative both for human and animal health. It was also great to meet and learn from health librarians from across the world. But I really felt the lack of more informal networking opportunities. While I was presenting from home, there were few opportunities for attendees to engage with me and my content, and even fewer to interact with one another. They could only use the chat window in the Zoom meeting to respond with support or questions or refer to an article or a shared document. The chat window is a unique opportunity in virtual meetings but there aren't any ways to interact with other attendees offline or after each session. Only a few participants joined virtual coffee breaks on the Discord platform. This conference also lacked photography and official group photos the way we used to have them; however, we all tried to capture our moments with screenshots. Although I could not feel the presence of my attendees from all over the world, it was a memorable session because I had my whole family physically in my home office listening to my presentation and giving positive energy!

In the EAHIL 2020 Online Conference I became professionally active by joining and participating in a professional association and in a EVLG⁷ special interest group meeting. I learned new skills and about new resources. In an online interactive workshop Tuulevi Ovaska from University of Eastern Finland Library and her colleagues considered online fun tools for remote professional collaboration (e.g. AnswerGarden, Padlet, and Kahoot). I was offered some collaborations outside my immediate discipline (e.g. to work on a COVID-19 research study in Iran). I thought and acted globally. I became familiar with ALIA HLA⁸ and decided to build network with Australian colleagues. All these experiences are exactly what Vicki told me although her absence was felt during the EAHIL2020. Therefore, I want to thank her for valuable suggestions and her lasting friendship. Vicki Croft, a founder of the International Conference of Animal Health Specialists (ICAHIS), and the "queen of networking" according to Sarah McCord, has made my life different!

⁷ European Veterinary Libraries Group

⁸ Australian Library and Information Association: Health Libraries Australia