

A new chapter unfolds—an electronic-only journal

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As some of our most assiduous readers may already know, the history of the *Revista Panamericana de Salud Pública/Pan American Journal of Public Health* is even longer than its name. It harks back to an era when ministries of health and schools of public health—as distinct from those dealing with medicine—were first coming into being in Latin American governments and universities. At that point, formal research writing was yet a nascent art. The discoveries of leading Latin American luminaries such as Oswaldo Cruz and Carlos Finlay had already created quite a splash at International Sanitary Conventions of the American Republics. Their achievements fueled the passions of successive generations of researchers to pursue scientific advancement for the common good and helped consolidate a spirit of Pan American cooperation and solidarity.

The timely debut in May 1922 of the *Boletín Panamericano de Sanidad*—the Journal’s precursor—offered a regional forum for the exchange of emerging scientific ideas and concepts. As one of the earliest journals explicitly promoting international health discourse, the *Boletín’s* pages captured critical content that benefited contributors long before “publish or perish” became a watchword of the academic community. Aristides Alcibíades Moll, the Journal’s distinguished editor-in-chief, channeled it to a readership of public health authorities, university professors, and practicing hygienists eager to learn of new scientific findings and their possible applications.

Throughout its eight decades of continuous publication, the Journal’s mission has consistently been one of responding to the needs of those it serves and producing a publication reflective of changing times, tastes, and technologies. Just as its new name in 1923 (*Boletín de la Oficina Sanitaria Panamericana*) heralded the growing visibility of its mother institution as a viable regional entity, the creation of the *Bulletin of the Pan American Health Organization* in 1966 coincided with the recent emergence of Jamaica and Trinidad and Tobago as sovereign nations and as forerunners in a process which eventually culminated in the independence of a sufficient number of English-speaking Caribbean islands to rival the until-then decidedly “Latin American” flavor of PAHO’s scientific publishing ventures.

As the world trended toward cultural diversity and global economies in the 1990s, the Organization’s flagship journal accepted new challenges, merging with the *Bulletin* in 1997 to assume its current name and niche as a trilingual (English, Portuguese, Spanish) double-blind peer-reviewed monthly journal showcasing original scientific research. Today as always, it provides an outlet for regional public health research findings, with a focus on Latin America and the Caribbean, and presents perspectives from leading thinkers on sociopolitical trends influencing the general direction of public health activities in the Americas.

An underlying, perhaps less visible component of the Journal’s responsiveness to change has been its concern to provide access to its contents through the most suitable formats acceptable to a majority of readers. Following its most recent reincarnation, the publication stood at the crossroads of traditional versus virtual publication. Responding to the possibilities of emerging information technologies, an online full-text version was launched.

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Since then, as electronic access capacity has increased, so has the number of subscribers utilizing this medium. Our readers in this category—now found in 82 countries—currently have the option of downloading contents from the Journal's own Web site (<http://journal.paho.org>), accessible from the PAHO Web home page, or SciELO Public Health (<http://scielosp.org>), a universal-access electronic library showcasing Ibero-American scientific periodicals. Readership preference surveys conducted in 2002 and 2008 indicated that the number of users of the electronic version had more than doubled during the interval between the two studies.

In late 2008, PAHO convened a workshop of internal and external experts on knowledge dissemination to envision the Journal's short- and long-term future and discuss strategies to optimize its operations and limited resources while continuing to provide services of the highest quality possible to its users. A principal topic was the desirability of fully integrating the Journal within the stable of other frequently visited PAHO information sources disseminated through institutional portals. There was a strong consensus that innovative information technologies currently available to the Organization offer the most efficient vehicle for increasing exposure and visibility of the Journal's contents and that new distribution possibilities, including social networking sites, provide the opportunity for exponential growth.

"The world's scientific publishing sphere has been rapidly and constantly evolving since the advent of new information and communication technologies. Shifts in publication policies—especially in response to the growing demand for open access—have also changed work models," noted one of the workshop's participants. "The Journal is ideally positioned to assume a leadership role in this changing arena, particularly given its strengthening impact factor and widespread prestige and recognition in the Americas and beyond."

The panel members also analyzed the advisability of preserving the Journal's print version in light of drastic reductions in press runs in recent years that in turn have resulted in increased per-unit costs. Other factors cited included distribution costs, rising paper costs, and related environmental concerns. The group issued a collective recommendation that the Journal consider discontinuing its print version as soon as feasible to maximize resources and rationalize their reallocation.

Based on this assessment, the decision has been made to convert the Journal into an exclusively electronic publication effective with the July 2009 issue. For those who have followed its history, this change marks merely one more milestone in the life of a seasoned, yet vibrant octogenarian whose longevity may be attributed to a tireless quest for relevancy, timeless dedication to the efficient dissemination of critical public health knowledge, and agility in responding and adapting to the demands of an ever-changing world.