

I declare that I have no conflicts of interest.

Timothy A Carey
tim.carey@flinders.edu.au

Centre for Remote Health, Alice Springs, NT 0871, Australia

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allowing for the submission of any domain name type. This led to nearly 2000 applications, including four for .health. Yet, in this round of proposals, applicants for .health are exclusively for-profit, non-public, private sector companies that have few if any restrictions on future .health use.

The list of applicants includes companies that have private equity or venture capital backing and that largely would offer services on a first-come, first-served basis. There also seems to be no representation from developing countries or international and intergovernmental organisations. Indeed, ICANN's expensive application fee (US\$185 000) and high maintenance costs (\$25 000 per year) are clearly outside the reach of many budget strapped global health organisations.⁴

In response, the international community, WHO, countries including Mali and France, civil society, and even ICANN's own independent watchdog have lodged formal objections on grounds that the domain will not be used in the public interest. These objections have largely been upheld by ICANN's At-Large Advisory Committee and Governmental Advisory Committee, which is delaying the impending launch of .health originally scheduled for 2013.⁵

This delay is fortuitous because it provides the international community and WHO with a short-window of time to intercede and call for .health to be treated as special and different from other domains. This should begin with recategorisation of .health as a sponsored generic top-level domain, which would allow enforcement of rules, eligibility for future uses and registrants, and require it to be operated in the interest of the global health community. Hence, by securing .health as a global public good and not a private interest, development of a dedicated and safe online space for health can become more than just a virtual reality.

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*Tim K Mackey, Bryan A Liang,
Amir Attaran, Jillian C Kohler
tmackey@ucsd.edu

University of California San Diego, School of Medicine, San Diego, CA 92103-8770, USA (TKM, BAL); Institute of Health Law Studies, California Western School of Law, San Diego, CA, USA (TKM); University of Ottawa, Faculty of Law, Ottawa, ON, Canada (AA); and University of Toronto, Leslie Dan Faculty of Pharmacy, Toronto, ON, Canada (JCK)

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Ensuring the future of health information online

The future of critical health information on the internet is for sale to private bidders, who have no discernible expertise in public health or medicine. Possibly as early as November, 2013, the rights to a new website suffix dot health (.health), alongside familiar ".com" and ".org" domains, are likely to be awarded to a for-profit company by the Internet Corporation for Assigned Names and Numbers (ICANN), a non-profit organisation that controls all internet naming. This will effectively privatise all future uses of the .health domain and could have a profound effect on health information access and quality for generations to come.

More than a decade ago, WHO and consumer groups called for a dedicated and safe space for health information on the internet by proposing their own .health domain.¹ In 2000, ICANN rejected this request.² Since then, the use of the internet for health information has rapidly proliferated, with an estimated 100 000 health-related websites with little or no quality assessment of content.^{1,3}

In 2008, ICANN decided to create new generic top-level domain names



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