

Access all areas? Licensing and authentication on the NeLH

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Description of the Athens access management system, providing authentication for use of NeLH's licensed resources.

The goal of the NeLH <<http://www.nelh.nhs.uk>> is to provide clinicians and managers with access to the best current know-how and knowledge to support health care related decisions. Currently, some of the key knowledge resources on NeLH are licensed for specific groups:

- Cochrane Library
- Clinical Evidence
- Medendum e-guidelines
- Evidence Based On Call
- ZETOC
- Primal Pictures Anatomy Database

Specific groups entitled to use these resources are NHS staff, healthcare students and users providing services to the NHS (e.g. education and training). Further information on the groups eligible to use these resources is available electronically <<http://www.nelh.nhs.uk/eligibility.asp>>.

Access to the various resources is managed using the Athens Access Management System (AMS). As a number of new Athens' features were launched recently, this update offers a timely reminder of how authentication on the NeLH works and an outline of the latest enhancements.

The Athens Access Management System

Access management is a crucial issue for the NeLH as many health professionals do not have easy access to a computer at work, and many undertake study in their own time. It is, therefore, important to offer both NHSnet and Internet access to NeLH resources. The Athens AMS was chosen to manage access to NeLH resources because it is a robust and state-of-the-art service. Athens AMS is a service of EduServ <<http://www.eduserv.ac.uk>> and has been used in higher education since 1996. The key advantage of Athens is for the user – single password access to a multitude of resources plus off-site access. However, a number of

benefits are obvious to service providers and intermediaries such as libraries.

Access management is made up of two core components: authentication (*i.e.* who the user is) and authorisation (*i.e.* which resources the user is allowed to access). Authentication of NHSnet users is by IP address. An IP address is a number with two parts: the identifier of a particular network on the Internet and an identifier of a particular device within that network. The downside of this method is that it does not allow off-site use. Authentication for Internet users is by valid username and password, obtained by registering with the NeLH. This method allows access from any computer, anywhere. Some of the NHS regional library units, such as Trent and West Midlands, have already been using Athens for some time and so manage registrations for NHS staff within their catchment areas. This has the added advantage for users that a single password gives them access to NeLH and regional resources.

A very useful diagram, provided by EduServ, is available on the Athens Web site <http://www.athensams.net/dsp/agent_intro.html>. This shows in a very simple way how the Athens AMS works. The user accesses the data service provider (DSP), in this case the NeLH. Because access to licensed content is controlled, user credentials are requested, *i.e.* the IP address or an Athens username and password. These credentials are checked by the Athens agent. This is a piece of software which sits on the DSP's server. It verifies the credentials with the remote Athens server. This server maintains a database of registered users and the resources which they are authorised to use.

Registration

Eligible users wishing to access licensed resources from home need an Athens account providing them with a user name and password. Some NHS

libraries already use Athens, so some NHS staff may already have an account (*e.g.* for Medline). Alternatively, Athens accounts can be set up via the NeLH Web site by completing a short form, providing details such as name and e-mail address. For those users registering on an NHSnet-connected computer, registration is almost instantaneous as access to NHSnet incorporates built-in verification. For those registering via the Internet, their eligibility must be verified. This verification is manual so incurs some delays; however, to meet license agreements, this is absolutely essential.

New features

The MyAthens <<http://www.athensams.net/myathens>> service enables you to list all the resources you are entitled to use. You can also see contact details for your own Athens administrator (who should be the point of contact for any queries) and you can change your password. To display this information, you simply need to enter your Athens username and password.

Athens now offers Single Sign On (SSO), where a user can move from one Athens-protected resource to another without having to re-key their username and password. This will enable the user to switch from NeLH to regional and other resources easily, whether accessing the service directly, or via MyAthens.

Athens SSO operates by using session-based cookies as a means of storing an encrypted session token. This means that when the browser session is closed down, the information is removed and the Athens SSO session comes to an end. Subsequent browser sessions will require re-authentication, thus providing security for shared PCs. EduServ are encouraging all service providers to implement SSO by the autumn of 2002, and progress so far has been very good. (cont'd on next page)