

The Public Legal Education and Information Portal Project

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This paper describes a website that will be launched in early 2009, and how British Columbia lawyers involved in pro bono work might find it useful. The working name for the website while it is being developed is the PLEI Portal. PLEI stands for public legal education and information, and is an acronym used by the community of providers that delivers legal education and information aimed at the public. (The website won't be called the PLEI Portal, but rather something – still to be determined – that we hope people will find much catchier.)

The PLEI Portal aims to be a unified point of access to diverse sources of legal information, education and help in British Columbia. The site will allow end users – members of the public in BC, as well as legal service providers, educators, and students – to search across and link into legal information and law-related services that reside on a range of websites. The site is being developed by the BC Courthouse Library on behalf of the PLEI Working Group, an informal network of BC organizations that provide or support PLEI, with funding from the Law Foundation of BC.¹

Changing Habits in Information Seeking

It is to state the obvious to say that the Internet is transforming the way in which people get information. It can be informative to look at trends in health care information seeking, where much more research has been done than in the legal sphere. In 2005, more than one-third of Canadian adults used the Internet to search for health information.² Recent research done by the Center for Studying Health System Change confirms that the Internet is the most rapidly growing source of health information, with the number of online health searches doubling between 2001 and 2007, with the result that people's use of the Internet for health information is now on par with their use of more traditional, longstanding sources of books, magazines and newspapers (33%) and friends or relatives (31%).³

And when we focus in on the experience of those with a specific health issue, the numbers look even more dramatic. Recent studies show that 55-65% of patients have used the Internet to find information on their health condition.⁴ Interestingly, in one study, although over 60% of new rheumatology patients researched their conditions online prior to their initial appointment, only 20% of online information seekers discussed that information with their physicians.⁵ Most patients did not discuss their information seeking because they primarily feared being perceived as challenging their physician; yet, in an intriguing twist, physician and patient appointment satisfaction was significantly higher when Internet information was discussed.

The trend to Internet information seeking can be seen in the legal sphere as well. A survey commissioned by Thomson FindLaw of the legal needs of consumers in the United States revealed that 84% of consumers with a legal need who did research used the Internet, far more than those who relied on friends and family, libraries, or local bar associations.⁶ Interestingly, about half of the

consumers who used the Internet to access information about their legal issue decided to contact a lawyer. That didn't mean, however, that the searchers were frustrated by what they found online. The vast majority (80%) of consumers who searched for legal information on the Internet responded that they would be likely to use the Internet as a legal resource in the future.

Why Is the PLEI Portal Needed?

So people are turning increasingly to the Internet for information. In many contexts, it isn't as an alternative to seeking professional advice, but as a complementary activity – the new rheumatology patient going online to research their condition prior to meeting with their physician, or the consumer with a legal need who researches their situation on the Internet prior to deciding to contact a lawyer.

This then raises the question of what are people finding when they go online? The Internet has matured beyond the early days when it seemed like for every reliable website, there were dozens of homespun or downright unreliable efforts. The link popularity algorithms of search engines like Google now provide search experiences where most of the time, the more reliable information tends to come up high in search engine results. But problems still remain:

- the accuracy and reliability of Internet information on any topic can vary widely
- search engines tend to turn up commercial resources more than non-commercial resources
- to effectively find things, people need to know what search terms to use

These problems are what the PLEI Portal aims to solve in the realm of helping British Columbians find legal information and help. By offering a single point of entry into legal information, education and help for British Columbians, the PLEI Portal will represent a trustworthy, guided route taking users to relevant legal information and services.

The PLEI Portal won't be the first website in British Columbia with this aim. For example, two sites developed and maintained by participants in the Portal project aggregate a significant number of public legal education and information resources:

- LawLINK (<http://www.lawlink.bc.ca>): From Legal Services Society, LawLINK features links to over 400 PLEI resources aimed at low-income British Columbians.
- Electronic Law Library (<http://www.bclibrary.ca/ell/>): Originally developed by LSS and now maintained by the BC Courthouse Library, ELL provides links to over 800 PLEI resources, with the primary audience being public librarians.

The PLEI Portal will include and extend these sites, in several ways:

- The information resources will extend to more topics than are covered on LawLINK, and to more audiences than either site.
- The Portal will include law-related services in addition to legal information resources and education. In the development of the Portal we found that members of the public often

don't know whether they need legal information or legal help *or* both information and help. The Portal aims to seamlessly link users from information to help, and vice versa.

- In addition to supporting searching, the Portal will feature clickable lists of plain language legal terms, aiding those users who don't know what search terms to use to find what they're looking for.

Just What is PLEI?

When we say the PLEI Portal will guide users to “relevant legal information and services”, we of course have to define what legal information and services to include on the site. This is an alternative way of asking what do we mean when we say “public legal education and information”? It sounds like the answer should be self-evident: legal education and legal information aimed at the public. But there have been different perspectives on this question right from the beginnings of PLEI as a grassroots movement in the late 1960s and early 1970s, featuring activists and reformers seeking to make the law more accessible. As PLEI evolved into a mature field funded in significant part by provincial law foundations and Justice Canada, the debate continued over how to define public legal education and information. At the risk of oversimplifying, the debate features two extremes of how to define PLEI:

- PLEI is practical legal information designed to assist people to understand particular legal problems.
- PLEI is a tool to enhance public understanding of the justice system. This more expansive definition speaks to the concept that at the end of the day, confidence in the justice system is largely influenced by people's sense of how accessible and comprehensible the justice system really is.

For the PLEI Portal, the definition of PLEI falls between these two extremes, in which the site features practical legal information designed to assist people to understand particular legal problems, but also features ways to access law-related services, and in addition includes education on the legal system, law reform, and other resources that can enhance public understanding of the justice system. Examples of the information and help the Portal will provide access to include:

- Legal Services Society publications, online self-help resources, and advice & representation services
- Peoples Law School booklets and classes
- Law Courts Education Society videos, online self-help resources, and classroom tools
- CBABC Dial-a-Law scripts
- Ministry of Attorney General PLEI resources
- Legal advice programs (lawyer referral, pro bono clinics and law student legal advice programs)

- Specialized legal clinics providing advice or representation services (Community Legal Assistance Society, BC Public Interest Advocacy Centre, etc.)
- Courthouse libraries
- And hundreds of other sources of legal information and legal help

How Will the Portal Help People Find What They're Looking For?

The PLEI Portal will feature three primary ways for people to find legal information and help:

- A **legal issues section** that allows users to search or browse through legal information and educational resources from the 24 organizations formally participating in the Portal project, as well as dozens of others. The legal issues are expressed in plain language, such as Housing & Tenancy, Crime, and Accidents & Injuries.
- A **map** (called the HelpMap) that allows users to search over a map of British Columbia for law-related services by keyword, by their location, by their legal issue, and by the type of help they are seeking (advocacy, advice or representation; information or self help; etc.). Think of Google Maps but focused on the legal sphere in British Columbia.
- A **common questions section** that features questions on a wide range of legal issues, with links in to the most relevant resources and services on those issues. From “How do I get a restraining order?” to “I’ve just been dismissed (fired) from my job; what can I do?”, these questions are frequently asked, and the Portal will point users to where the answers and help exists.

How Lawyers Involved in Pro Bono Work Might Use the Portal

There are two primary ways in which lawyers involved in pro bono work might find the PLEI Portal to be useful:

- Referring clients to the basic information on the site, to help clients develop their initial understanding of the issues and process involved.
- Referring clients to find information or law-related services that complement the work done by the lawyer.

Similar to how the new patient goes online to research their health condition prior to their first appointment – and reports greater satisfaction if they discuss their information seeking with their physician – the pro bono client could be encouraged to go online prior to the first appointment with the pro bono lawyer and review some of the basic information accessible through the Portal on the issues or process likely to be discussed in the meeting with the lawyer.

Alternatively, as the client relationship develops, the pro bono lawyer may consider referring a client to the Portal to access information or law-related services that complement the work done by the lawyer. In a second phase of work in 2009, the Portal's HelpMap will be extended to add more law-related services to the map, including community legal advocates, key government agencies, and law-related counseling and support groups.

The PLEI Portal will be available online in early 2009. The project website at www.pleiportal.org will announce the formal launch. We hope the site will evolve into a useful addition to the pro bono lawyer's toolkit.

¹ The PLEI Working Group is comprised of the BC Courthouse Library Society, the Law Courts Education Society, Legal Services Society, People's Law School, the Ministry of Attorney General, the Law Foundation of BC, and PovNet. There are an additional 17 organizations formally participating in the PLEI Portal initiative, all of whom are involved in delivering legal education, information or services in BC, and are listed on the PLEI Portal project website at <http://www.pleiportal.org/>.

² Underhill & Mckeown, "Getting a Second Opinion: Health Information and the Internet", *Health Rep.*, vol 19(1), March 2008, p. 65-69.

³ Tu & Cohen, "Striking Jump in Consumers Seeking Health Care Information", Center for Studying Health System Change, Tracking Report No. 20, August 2008, available at <http://www.hschange.org/CONTENT/1006/>.

⁴ See, for example, Hay et al "Prepared Patients: Internet Information Seeking by New Rheumatology Patients", *Arthritis Rheum*, vol. 59(4), April 15, 2008, p. 575-582, where 62.5% of new rheumatology patients looked up their symptoms or suspected condition on the Internet prior to their first appointment, and Seto et al, "Internet Use by End-Stage Renal Disease Patients", *Hemodial Int*, vol. 11(3), July 2007, p. 328-332, where 58% of kidney disease patients had used the Internet to find information on their health condition.

⁵ Hay et al, *supra*.

⁶ "How Consumers Meet Their Legal Needs Online", FindLaw, available at <http://www.lawyermarketing.com/cm/custom/how-consumers-meet-their-legal-needs-online.asp>.