Health Information

Deborah Avriel, Barbara Aronson, & Irene Bertrand

Appropriate information: new products and services

Effective health information services require action on three major levels: identifying and acquiring appropriate resources; applying appropriate methodologies for management of information and its communication; and stimulating local initiatives and applications. WHO’s Programme of Library and Health Literature Services proposes its methodologies and products for creating and improving effective information services to health workers.

In 1974 a specific Health Literature Services Programme was established to develop ways and means to support Member States in setting up national infrastructures of information services and to facilitate access to valid and relevant information. The World Health Organization operates at global, regional and country level; WHO’s library network now consists of the Office of Library and Health Literature Services (HLT) at headquarters in Geneva and the libraries of the six regional offices, in Washington DC, Copenhagen, Brazzaville, Alexandria, New Delhi and Manila. It also includes the Library of the International Agency for Research in Cancer (in Lyons, France) and BIREME, the Latin American and Caribbean Center on Health Sciences Information (in São Paolo, Brazil). WHO regional libraries operate programmes whose activities are focused on the establishment and coordination of national and regional library networks, training of library manpower, access to information and document delivery sources, sharing of expertise and resources, and bibliographic control of locally produced health literature.

HLT in Geneva, working at the global level, is developing new strategies based on innovation and the lessons learned from past experience. This article presents our thoughts and activities for improving the availability of and access to relevant information resources and services. Our development strategies rely less on transferring information material alone, but
rather on developing tools for self-reliance, presenting options for making choices, promoting fuller integration in the information cycle and providing methods for assuring sustainability. Our Programme activities are based on our experience in providing services to our own clients, who come from the Member States and who represent all the different WHO technical programmes and units, as well as our links and contacts with professional colleagues in both developing and industrialized countries.

Our Programme activities are aimed at all the different stages of the information cycle: from scientists and other producers of information, through publishers, distributors and librarians, to local providers of health care and education. Successful information services depend on coordination and communication among all these groups.

Effective services require action on three major levels:

— identifying and acquiring appropriate resources: being informed about information;
— applying appropriate methodologies for management of information and its communication;
— stimulating local initiatives and applications.

**Appropriate resources**

Information and information services are always context-dependent. Information is produced from observation, and from the desire to learn and to communicate. Information is required because it is necessary for decision-making and for action in response to events and situations. Providers of information services must be aware of all aspects of the specific context in which they are functioning. They must know what is needed, and by whom. They must know what information resources are available—locally, regionally and internationally.

HLT offers ways to identify and acquire information from WHO and worldwide.

**WHO-produced information**

WHO’s publications, journals, and documents are available in all Member States: at depository and university libraries, at the Ministry of Health, and at WHO Representatives’ offices. The problem for an information service provider is not so much the availability of this resource as quickly identifying the specific item which will answer a particular demand or need. For this purpose the WHO Library has created, maintains and distributes a database, WHOLIS, and a current update, WHODOC.

WHOLIS (World Health Organization Library Information System) is the bibliographical database of WHO’s recorded information. It indexes headquarters and regional office publications, journal articles, technical and policy documents, audiovisual material, and joint publications of WHO with other publishers and international organizations; it also includes publications of the International Agency for Research on Cancer (IARC), Lyon, and the Council for International Organizations of Medical Sciences (CIOMS), Geneva.

Separate entries are made for English, French and Spanish editions (when available). Official and regional working languages (Arabic, Chinese, Russian, German, Portuguese) and other translations are indicated.
WHOLIS is therefore the tool which identifies pertinent items of WHO-produced information. It can be used both in its complete form, or in subsets (by subject, by language, etc.) as a definitive index. It can also be used, by copying or downloading records, to create an “instant” or ready-made catalogue for a local collection of WHO material.

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Subsets of WHOLIS (by date, language, subject, etc.) are available on diskette. The entire database is available online from a number of international non-profit hosts (SPRI, IDRC, RESODOC). It is also included in the LILACS (Latin American and Caribbean Health Sciences Literature) CD-ROM as a separate database.

WHODOC (List of recent WHO Publications and Documents) is the bimonthly update of WHOLIS. WHODOC can be used for keeping track of the latest information from WHO (current awareness). It is also a useful tool for choosing items to order.

The printed version of WHODOC is issued in five bimonthly issues, and the sixth issue is an annual cumulation. An “electronic” (computer-readable) version of WHODOC is available in MICRO CDS/ISIS, CARDBOX PLUS or ASCII files. Instructions are given on how to obtain the material listed.

WHODOC records can be automatically transferred to local catalogues as items are ordered.

Information produced by sources other than WHO

In addition to material produced by WHO, information service providers need to be able to identify and acquire appropriate resources produced in their own countries and regions, and internationally.

Tools for identifying needed material

Specialized subject lists relevant to “hot” topics are produced by HLT in collaboration with WHO technical programmes. The lists are compiled from the database of the WHO Library at headquarters, and are representative of recent material added to the library collection. “Financing health care in developing countries” and “Environmental health” are examples of recent lists.

Every two weeks, HLT produces a Recent additions list of selected items added to the database during that period. These lists are sent to the regional office libraries to promote current awareness and for selection purposes.

The WHO regional office libraries receive all the specialized subject lists and the recent additions lists. Copies of these lists are also available electronically over the INTERNET from the WHO server (see p. 414).

Tools for health literature purchase

Identifying the appropriate resource is only the first step: placing orders and paying can be very difficult when budgets are minimal,
the suppliers are on other continents, and the prices are in hard currency. HLT acts as central purchasing agent for books, periodicals, and CD-ROMs for regional office libraries, WHO projects in regions, WHO collaborating centres, and medical libraries in Member States. The WHO Revolving Fund assists medical institutions that lack foreign currency to purchase medical equipment and literature. WHO accepts the national currency of Member States and convertible currencies are then used to purchase the items ordered.

Via the International Exchange of Duplicate Medical Literature, HLT also acts as a clearing centre for information about duplicate medical literature covering books, periodicals, reports, etc. on health and allied subjects which are available for free disposal by cooperating libraries. Lists of wants and offers of books and periodicals are prepared by participating libraries, and HLT distributes the lists to members of the exchange scheme, who contact each other directly for the required items.

Appropriate methodologies

Finding out about and acquiring publications and other resources is an essential information activity, but it is not a service. Services are created by applying methodologies for information organization and dissemination. The latest information technologies, including computers and satellites, offer exciting possibilities for creating new kinds of information packages and offering improved services. Two of our HLT projects integrate electronic database technology with management of collections. These ready-to-use packages consist of collections of printed material with methodologies for organizing them physically and for retrieving specific information.

WHO Documentation Module

In the WHO Documentation Module information technology is used to transfer records from the WHOLIS database. These records, together with an appropriate methodology for the simple physical organization of WHO material gives a “turn-key” WHO collection. It consists of recent WHO publications, periodicals, technical and administrative documents, etc., arranged in labelled boxes together with bibliographic indexes on diskette for in-depth searching. Originally proposed to WHO Representatives in Member States as a means of strengthening access to their own information and documentation resources without the services of a professional librarian, WHO Documentation Modules can be acquired by other institutions. The simple methodology for arrangement and software recommended make it easy to integrate local material into the collection.

Essential Information Documentation Modules

HLT’s newest project, which is still in its preparatory stages, uses the same concept: Essential Information Documentation Modules will be ready-to-use “specialized subject libraries” of quality texts and data (books, periodicals, documents, and CD-ROMs) issued by WHO and other agencies and publishers, and selected and evaluated by technical experts in the particular subject in collaboration with HLT. The kits will also contain indexes to search and retrieve information in electronic form, or in printed form if a microcomputer is not available. The package is designed in modular fashion, with a core collection that can and should be expanded as necessary. One of the goals of producing these modules is the search for optimal ways to deliver basic specialized information in a
ready-to-use fashion to people who need it, such as: health professionals at all levels, scientists, educators, research institutes, the media, nongovernmental organizations, and medical libraries in developing countries. The project maximizes the application of WHO expertise both in the subject area and in the modern management of information. Kits now in preparation are on mental health and health economics.

**Standard formats**

People working with information should dedicate their efforts to producing services. To help them spend minimum time on technical procedures, HLT has developed standard formats including guides and manuals for the creation of local databases in MICRO/ISIS and CARDBOX.

**INTERNET**

Developments in technology and especially in communications are making interregional and international collaboration easier. As more and more institutions within countries — universities in particular — become part of the INTERNET, except Antarctica, connected to over 9000 networks. Services on the INTERNET include electronic mail (E-mail), file transfer (FTP) to and from remote computers, and remote login (TELNET) to computers in the network located throughout the world.

A number of files are available for file transfer from WHO headquarters' FTP server: WHODOC (in MICRO CDS/ISIS database format and in printing format), WHO Liaison, and WHO Library Digest. The address of the WHO computer is WHOSRV.WHO.CH. Login as ANONYMOUS; the password is your E-mail address. Files are placed in the directory/PROGRAMME/HLT. Read the README file for the information on the files in the directory before transferring files.

E-mail can be used to communicate with the WHO Library; the address is HLT@WHO.CH.

**Stimulating local initiatives**

Information resources and the methodologies for turning them into services necessarily reflect the linguistic, geographical, cultural and other characteristics of the producer. The provider of good information services adapts what is available to serve the actual needs and demands of the user. New tools sometimes have to be developed which address local realities and answer well-identified local information needs. This is the ultimate task of the information service provider.

At this level, HLT’s role consists of identifying individuals and projects which are ready to move ahead, giving them technical support and visibility, helping them find partners and sponsors. Initiatives do not need to be large or expensive to be of value. What is important is creativity and
flexibility in finding an approach which is relevant to a particular situation. HLT focuses on communication: creating connections and networks among individuals and institutions.

Liaison

The WHO Library issues a free-of-charge newsletter, Liaison, three times a year. Its title expresses our aim to make it a link or bridge between health libraries and documentation services around the world. It is not intended to compete with medical library journals or highly technical newsletters from large scientific information systems. Its purpose is dual: first, to convey information on new appropriate technologies, innovative projects and ideas to assist health librarians in developing countries, which are isolated geographically and professionally, in order to carry out their work more effectively. Secondly, Liaison aims to create links between health librarians in developing and developed countries by encouraging input from our readers in the form of short articles on their individual initiatives and experiences, questions, suggestions on future content, etc. and to establish a dialogue among our readers, a network of communicators pursuing similar goals.

Our target audience is therefore developing country health information professionals, which in the broadest sense includes librarians, documentalists, health educators, media specialists, publishers — in fact anyone working in the area of transfer of health information. Information specialists from developed countries who are interested in the problems of their colleagues in the Third World are encouraged to participate in schemes such as the International Exchange of Health Literature or twinning activities.

In recent issues of Liaison we have developed specific themes of particular relevance to our colleagues in developing countries, such as use of CD-ROMs, health learning materials, document procurement, and bibliographic control of locally produced material. We cannot always come up with answers to the problems we all face, but by setting out the options we hope to direct readers to appropriate sources and to share their resources and thoughts.

WHO Library Digest

A recent experiment in the use of computers and communications to improve health information transfer in developing countries has led to the creation of the WHO Library Digest. Bibliographical and factual information on recent WHO material relevant to Africa is compiled each month from WHO publications, documents, periodical articles, press releases, and newsletters as well as non-WHO-generated news from the general scientific and medical press. The Digest is sent in electronic form by packet low-altitude satellite to groundstations in Africa. This orbital same-day mail delivery system, called Healthnet, is run by SatelLife, and the WHO Library Digest is one of the regular electronic bulletins being sent to medical libraries and other institutions linked by this new form of communications technology.

The WHO Library Digest is not intended solely to provide the recipient with the latest news about WHO. It is also "raw material" (the electronic file and the paper print-out) for our colleagues to develop their own dissemination services. Librarians receiving the Digest can reproduce part or all of it, perhaps combined with other locally produced information (tables of contents of local or locally received journals, announcements of scientific meetings, etc.).
as a current awareness bulletin for their users and communities. The Digest might even be useful for attracting new users to information. For instance, as press releases are included, the contents of the Digest could be of interest to local journalists.

Healthnet ground stations have been installed in a number of African countries (Cameroon, Ghana, Kenya, Mozambique, Tanzania, Uganda, and Zambia), and additional stations are licensed for imminent use (Malawi, Mali, and Sudan). In countries such as Zambia where there is a highly developed E-mail network, copies of the WHO Library Digest are disseminated throughout the country and printed out for use in medical schools and hospitals. SatelLife is planning to distribute the Digest and other electronic bulletins via E-mail in the near future to African countries which are not linked at present by Healthnet. A printed version of the Digest is produced by HLT and distributed to WHO Representatives in the African region.

African Index Medicus

A particularly interesting example of HLT’s stimulation of local initiatives is the African Index Medicus project, an ambitious regional initiative to improve access to health information related to the continent. This project demonstrates the close working links between the libraries of WHO headquarters and the Regional Office for Africa (AFRO), in collaboration with the Association of Health Information and Libraries in Africa (AHILA) together with other foundations and agencies working in similar areas, such as the Health Foundation.

The need for improved access to sources of information relating to health issues of African countries has long been felt by researchers, development agencies, health administrators and planners both inside and outside the continent. Very few African health and biomedical information sources are included in the world’s leading bibliographic databases and there is a wealth of untapped information in books, reports and studies from international development agencies, nongovernmental organizations, and local institutions. Local authors, who are fully aware that if they publish in the prestigious developed country journals they will receive greater visibility for their research, shun their national journals.

The African Index Medicus is a decentralized project using standardized methodologies and database formats; each country will create its own database of records of local health materials to be merged at the AFRO Library to form a regional database from which a variety of products in printed or electronic form will be generated. Individual countries will produce their own current awareness digests of the latest information on the country’s health which will be disseminated nationally.

At this stage, motivated individuals at pilot sites are being identified and trained to increase their skills and expand their contacts with their professional colleagues, local producers, publishers and users of information. Donor partners are being sought to sponsor sites in countries where they have present grantees working in similar activities. The first pilot products are expected by the end of this year. We hope that this action will win the support of African scientists and researchers as inclusion of their publications in the database will make them more visible at a global level. With the backup, technical support, encouragement and advice from headquarters and AFRO libraries, this project launched by a group of motivated
African health librarians will facilitate access to their continent’s health literature.

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The health information cycle comprises numerous activities, involving interactions among individuals and groups from a range of professions: scientists, health workers, librarians, publishers, database producers, and others. What we have not mentioned here is the importance of the role of the producer of information. Scientists and health workers must ensure that they receive information, that they integrate information-seeking with their regular work, and that they include the costs of providing information services in budgets and research proposals. Only collaboration between the producers of information and the providers of information services will improve quality all round. The ultimate beneficiaries will be the users of the services (who are often themselves the producers of information) and the public whose health care will be improved.

**Human rights**

A fundamental component of a successful AIDS programme is a strong policy of non-discrimination with respect to HIV-infected individuals or those believed to be at risk of infection. Discrimination and stigmatization, which are still an all too common response to HIV-infected people, have been shown over and over again to be counter-productive to slowing the spread of HIV/AIDS. Thus, not only is discrimination a violation of human rights, it also impedes sound public health principles.