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New activities at the World Health Organization Library

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WHO Library and Information Networks for Knowledge



The Opportunity to Grow

Change is in the air at the World Health Organization (<http://www.who.int>). It has been this way since Dr Gro Harlem Brundtland began her mandate as Director-General four years ago and walked in with new ideas, new energy and a pledge to place health at the core of the international development agenda. (<http://www.who.int/dg/>)

In keeping with this spirit of change and renewal, the WHO Library decided to seize the opportunity to renew itself as well. We decided to begin with our name. The WHO Library had been known for decades as the Office of Library and Health Literature Services, and had served well under this banner. A staff brainstorming session produced our new name: Library Information Networks for Knowledge, whose acronym is LINK. As a large part of our mandate is to link people, libraries, resources and knowledge, we agreed that this was a fit.

Fortunately the WHO Library finds itself in a very favourable constellation in the structure of WHO, belonging to a cluster called Evidence and Information for Policy, and in the Department of Health Information Management and Dissemination. The Library shares this department with the Publishing unit, the Web, Marketing and Dissemination, the WHO Bulletin and the World Health Report.

While respecting individual units' expertise, there is a lot of interactivity between these units, leading to a richer mix for all.

At our invitation, the Director-General came to the Library at the start of her mandate, spent time looking and listening, asking questions. Her office began to use our services, and she has kept a pulse on our activities. Having this type of support from the top, and back-up from the levels in between, we gained confidence in doing things differently and presenting ideas for new projects.

This paper outlines some of the new activities that library staff have brought forward. Parallel to the new configuration at the WHO, technologies, content, approaches and needs were changing, and the time was right.

Our Mandate

Like other United Nations agencies, the WHO has a multi-faceted clientele, starting with its own personnel, spread out over six regional offices and headquarters in Geneva. We serve ministries of health and other government offices, the other UN and international agencies, NGO's, diplomatic missions, and because of our services on the Web, the general public worldwide.

One of our prime mandates is to ensure that the published work of the Organization is made accessible to our current user base as well as for posterity. Often the Library is the only place in the world where one can find WHO material that has research value today in the public health sector. We also provide access to worldwide health, medically-related and development information sources in a constantly expanding scope as health impacts on more and more disciplines.

Traditional Services

The WHO Library provides the core services found in most libraries of the United Nations system. The Library is open 47.5 hours a week. Our reference librarians provide assistance to over 4000 users per year, answer hundreds of e-mail queries every month. Our document delivery services are booming. Our WHOLIS database is available on the Web, and we maintain a thesaurus in three languages. With its over 75,000 records, WHOLIS is not only the collective memory of the WHO, it contains records of specialized and highly selective sources of non-WHO and commercially published material in health, development and related disciplines. The Collection Development sub-unit takes care of selection and acquisitions as well as the accessioning of materials, and participates in the UN system-wide Consortium. The Technical Cooperation subunit works at strengthening library services in the field. Finally, our IT Services department makes our digital initiatives a reality.

The Hybrid Library (<http://www.who.int/library>)

New activities at the WHO Library can be categorized by a term that is found more and more in library literature, that is, the hybrid library. The term hybrid had its origins in Darwinian theories of evolution and has entered the language of information professionals. It is used to describe new types of library services that attempt to integrate traditional print with electronic information resources. It is generally seen as a halfway step towards the full digital library, the route being traditional, automated, hybrid and finally digital libraries.

Full-text Links from WHOLIS Database (<http://www.who.int/library/database/>)

The news as far as the WHO Library Database (WHOLIS) is concerned is that it now provides over 20,000 links from the bibliographic record to the full text of WHO technical documents, press materials, WHO out-

of-print publications, selected WHO current publications, WHO Bulletin articles, and historical resources. These items are either scanned from the print by the Library or linked from existing electronic files.

Therefore WHOLIS also functions as a powerful document distribution tool. Over 1000 documents are downloaded from this database per day.

WHO in the Scientific Press

A very popular current awareness service has been WHO in the Scientific Press. This is a true hybrid in that it exists in both paper and recently, electronic form. Around 400 health related journals are regularly read by a librarian, and items concerning the work of the WHO, plus articles authored by WHO staff, are selected, photocopied and posted in the library for all to read, and photocopy if necessary. The development of the WHO intranet, and the changes in publishers' policies gave us the opportunity to download or scan these articles and to make them available to the WHO community. This service is available on the WHO intranet only.

GIFT (Global Information Full-Text)

The GIFT (Global Information Full Text) project came as a result of the obvious need for quality and recent information which in medicine and public health is found mainly (80%) in periodicals. Secondly, although the Library had been working on bridging the "information gap" between WHO components through collaboration with regional office libraries, there was no equity as to the access to information.

"One WHO" was a direction brought in by Dr Brundtland, and this project is an attempt to provide access to information to all of WHO. The timing was also right in that internet technologies had facilitated the flow of health information and the major publishers in medical, biomedical and related social sciences were all online.

The WHO Library negotiated a package for the whole of WHO - something the publishers and agents had never allowed before. This package includes databases and online journals for all WHO regional offices, country offices, specialized offices as well as headquarters. Included are databases available in the Ovid system, the Web of Knowledge, and access to 1000 online journal subscriptions through an outsourced interface with an alphabetic integrated menu.

This move to a very comprehensive digital journals library has been received with enthusiasm by users who have been clamouring for this, and with incredulity by users farther afield who have been suddenly flooded with more than they can integrate. Therefore next steps in the GIFT process are more training, including modules and guidelines for regions and countries, more interlinking, and the analysis of usage statistics to see what is being used, where.

HINARI (Health InterNetwork Access to Research Initiative) (<http://www.healthinternetwork.net>)

You may have seen the extensive media coverage that accompanied this initiative, which is part of the Health InterNetwork launched by the Secretary General of the United Nations in September 2000.

HINARI is the first phase of the Health InterNetwork project created to bridge the digital divide in health. It provides access to a vast library of the latest and best information on public health: more than 2000 of the major international electronic journals in health and related disciplines have been made available free to institutions in 68 countries. Access at very reduced rates will soon be extended to an additional 42 countries.

The WHO Library Collection Development Librarian, seconded to this initiative, negotiated this "first" with the major scientific, medical and technical publishers.

The Blue Trunks (<http://www.who.int/library/country/trunks/>)

At the other end of the spectrum, far from the electronic buzz of the GIFT project is a completely print based initiative known as the Blue Trunk Library. This is a mini-library, containing basic primary health care manuals, housed in a blue metal trunk, that was originally designed for districts in Africa where there are very few resources or personnel in the health sector. We now have over 1000 of these blue trunks, mainly in Africa but also in the Eastern Mediterranean region. This initiative has been very well received by both recipients and donors alike, and soon will be going global as a WHO information product. We are open to partnerships in this initiative.

Historical Resources (<http://www.who.int/library/historical/>)

Since the founding of WHO in 1948, the WHO Library systematically indexes and preserves the documentation arising from WHO activities. We have a Historical Resources Collection reference area where scholars and researchers often come to investigate the early years of WHO and public health. Most often archival research must be done on-site, but we have undertaken an ambitious project to scan some of the most important source documents and make the full text available from our web site. From the WHO Library web site, researchers world-wide can find the full text of disease classifications and nomenclature documents, history of international health organizations, history of WHO, including the first World Health Assembly in 1948, malaria documents, rare books on plague, smallpox and epidemiology. Facsimiles have been made so that print copies can be used by clients without harming the original.

A complete view of what we offer can be found on the WHO Library Web Site. (<http://www.who.int/library>). Our Library page is accessed over 100,000 times per day and is one of the most used of the WHO web site. In terms of the Organization's website, (<http://www.who.int>), the Library gives advice on a consistent and appropriate way to apply metadata to web pages, is part of the web working group and contributes to the WHO intranet as well.

Moving Forward

Today's libraries are in a strategic position to offer services in a vast array of forms, encompassing a wide range of options. For the UN System libraries, serving both the best and least equipped of clientele, there is no debate as to print vs. electronic. We need to have both. This paper has given a few examples of the hybrid library approach to information services in an international context.

WHO Library has done much to provide health information services to the One WHO and through our contribution to the WHO agenda of placing health at the core of development. In coming years our priority will be to continue to provide print based resources and training for those presently excluded from connectivity, and to provide better targeted access appropriate to local needs and conditions. Until every one of our constituents is connected to electronic resources, WHO Library will continue to be a hybrid library, allowing health information for all.