SESSION II

AVAILABLE INFORMATION SERVICES

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The services of a hospital medical library

R. TABOR
L.Th.(Hons).

Wessex Regional Library and Information Services

Summary

The purpose of a hospital medical library is described under the headings of diagnostic and treatment guide, current awareness and access to published literature. The Wessex Regional Library and Information Services is described.

Introduction

When talking about hospital libraries it should be realized that one is dealing with very recent developments. The current interest in libraries in the NHS has one point of origin, the Christchurch Conference on Postgraduate Medical Education of 1961. This led to the Sheffield report on regional organization of medical libraries and, in due course (1967), the appointment of a regional librarian in the Wessex region. Since that date, with a number of surveys of user needs for information in the health care world, the role of a library in medicine has become a little clearer. It is by no means universally accepted that medical libraries are necessary in a hospital, and the services described in this paper are still relatively rare in the British Health Service.

Purposes of a medical library

The purpose of the medical library in the hospital may be said to be three-fold: firstly to provide a guide to medical and surgical diagnosis and treatment; secondly, to permit and encourage awareness of current work in the field of medicine; and thirdly to give access to published material held by other libraries.

Guide to diagnosis and treatment

The medical library should provide a range of up-to-date texts on diagnosis and treatment. The

subject scope of this material will reflect the range of patients treated in the hospital, and the size and quality of the collection will depend upon financial resources and whether there is a qualified librarian in charge. Some works are usually reserved for 'reference only', while others are available for lending to staff. It is always tempting for doctors and nurses to argue that books on their own particular subject should be housed in their office or clinic. Such departmental collections can easily grow into separate libraries and the end result is a scattered information resource, expensive to maintain and not serving the real needs of the whole staff.

The important function of a library service is that it should be able to offer adequate access to the information required by the potential users. The library stock can be arranged for browsing in a classified sequence on the shelves, but the catalogues (author and subject/title) will provide more precise retrieval of relevant material. However, the library itself cannot and should not hold all relevant material. It should hold the sort of information most likely frequently to be asked for by its users, but it should also be able to give access to other information either through the secondary sources (indexes, bibliographies, abstracts and directories), or by contact with other libraries and information agencies. In addition on-line information retrieval systems such as MEDLINE can give very quick access to the world's medical periodical literature.

Current awareness

Health care is essentially an obsolescent activity. It becomes very important, therefore, for a medical library to permit and to encourage staff constantly to up-date their professional knowledge. This can

be done firstly by subscribing to a range of periodicals of interest to the users of the library and by ensuring that these are correctly organized for access—by efficient binding policy, by providing lists of periodicals available (in one's own library or in associated or neighbouring libraries) and secondly, by providing essential indexing/abstracting tools such as *Index Medicus*, *Excerpta Medica* and *International Pharmacy Abstracts*.

Usually the librarian will display the current issue of periodicals separately from the main back-runs and this can be a considerable help to doctors and other staff hard pressed for time. Some libraries circulate periodicals after they have come off current display. This may be practical in some situations but in most hospital libraries it is often better for the majority to treat all current periodicals as 'for reference only'.

Requests for periodical articles these days are mostly served by photocopying. If the article is really needed this is cheaper in total staff time and postage than lending out the periodical volume or part. Where possible the doctor, pharmacist or nurse ought to scan the article before requesting a photocopy as this cuts out much unnecessary work.

Libraries also undertake a range of other services designed to encourage staff to keep up-to-date in their professional knowledge. There are now many current-awareness services available, some free, some on subscription, from fairly general topics, such as Health Education or Care of the Elderly, to more specific subjects, such as Artificial Kidney and Leukaemia. Often these can be up-dated from time to time locally using *Index Medicus* or MEDLINE. These services are useful if a number of staff have similar subject interests for information. In a few cases an individual may need a highly personal information service or SDI (selective dissemination of information). Usually only a well staffed library can afford to consider SDI, although with a computer terminal available MEDLINE and its related or other data bases can be used for this purpose. A few doctors may be encouraged to use the MEDLINE terminal themselves, but it has been found over the past 2–3 years that the services of a skilled librarian/information officer are more often preferred.

Access to the published literature

Clearly no library can expect to acquire all relevant material even in its own subject field. Today libraries rely on networks to back up their own stock and services. NHS hospitals have not fared very well recently, except in large centres such as London, Edinburgh and Liverpool. Now the concept of regional library services is beginning to develop

although only half of the NHS regions have so far accomplished basic systems. By means of regional services hospital libraries can borrow from each other easily and quickly, and using union catalogues and union lists of periodicals it is fairly easy to identify whether the required item is located within the region. All these local schemes are part of the larger national library network with its major focus on the British Library (Lending Division) at Boston Spa in Yorkshire. From this library almost anything in the field of medicine or related subjects can be obtained.

In this short paper it has been possible only to mention a few of the services a modern medical library can provide. The range of subject interests of NHS staff is extremely wide and the information they require is equally wide and complex. Although this conference is concerned with the prescribing physician, in fact, doctors may need information on many fringe topics from nuclear physics, building technology through to management information. The hospital librarian needs to consider all these potential needs and to plan the stock and services to allow for access to other back-up library and information services.

A good professional librarian is the key to a successful library service. He will need to plan the services carefully, taking note to define the various categories of potential library users and their needs for information. The levels of the information required must also be determined and the purposes for which the information is needed. These will all help to establish priorities in acquiring stock and staff and deciding the character of the services to be offered. Because no library can hope to hold all relevant information and because other professional staff will not have time or knowledge of information handling, the staff of the medical library should expect to spend a significant amount of time in 'user instruction'—showing staff how to get the best results from the total library resources.

In the Wessex region a regional library and information service has begun to be developed which reaches out to all NHS staff. Note has been taken of the wide range of information materials needed and the fact that the staff are widely scattered geographically, and that by the nature of their work many practitioners tend to work in isolation. The answers to these problems have been to establish working libraries of essential information materials (print or non-print forms) at strategic local points throughout the region. For economy and efficiency these libraries are integrated—offering services freely to all types of staff both hospital and community workers—and are in the charge of a trained librarian. In this way it is believed that a library service has been created which is closely tailored to

local needs and which provides an optimum service with the maximum economies.

The medical library is not the only information unit operating in a hospital. There will be specialist information services offered by the pharmacy, by management and by some departments such as

rehabilitation. The library serves as a support to education, to management and to clinical diagnosis and treatment by providing access to published information. In many hospitals the medical library is beginning to be regarded as an essential supporting unit for the clinical care of the patient.