



The World Health Organization

Library Service

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THE WORLD HEALTH ORGANIZATION in Geneva, Switzerland, is charged under its constitution with the widest responsibilities for the improvement of the health standards of the people of the world. The necessity for an adequate medical library and reference service, as an essential adjunct to the technical work of WHO and its Secretariat, was early recognized. In December 1946, at a time when the organization was only in its preparatory phase, arrangements were made to deal with urgent library needs and requirements.

Today, the WHO Library in Geneva contains some 25,000 textbooks, monographs, and bound periodicals, in addition to a large collection of reprints, official documents, and annual reports and regularly receives nearly 1,500 current periodicals. The nucleus of the collection had been formed by the library of the Office International d'Hygiène Publique in Paris, whose functions and responsibilities have been inherited by WHO.

To supplement the WHO collection, there is available in the same building, the Palais des Nations, the large and well-stocked United Nations Library which includes the health and medical sections of the former League of Nations Library. Some of this material is available, by special arrangement, on long-term loan in the WHO Library, and access to it all is easy.

Administratively, the Library and Reference Section of WHO is part of the Division of Editorial and Reference Services. Its staff, which includes American, Belgian, Costa Rican, Dutch, English, French, Polish, and Swiss workers, numbers eighteen, nine of whom are trained librarians. The Section has to service an organization which is by now fully regionalized with offices and small libraries in New Delhi, Alex-

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andria, and Manila. Its chief functions may be summarized as follows: (1) to provide the WHO Secretariat with an information and library service and, more particularly, with a rapid and comprehensive service of medical documentation essential for the execution of its duties and responsibilities; (2) to provide Member Governments, WHO regional offices, and WHO field teams with a rapid and comprehensive service of medical documentation; (3) to advise upon and to procure medical literature, both under the regular budget and under technical assistance funds, for WHO Member Governments, WHO regional offices, and WHO field teams; (4) to advise Member Governments on their special requirements for the adequate development of medical library services, especially in conjunction with long-term WHO plans for strengthening national health administrations.

As may be imagined from the variegated nature of WHO's work, the requests received for information and bibliographies are both numerous and diverse. A WHO field worker in Rangoon, Burma, writes for a list of references (with reprints or photocopies) to the literature on histoplasmosis and histoplasmin sensitivity in South-East Asia; a WHO consultant needs a comprehensive bibliography on the toxicology to man and mammals of the new insecticides; the health department of a Member Government requests a list of teaching films on malaria; another asks for information on the optometric profession in various countries.

An essential requirement for reference work is an up-to-date index to the current periodical literature. There have, unfortunately, been serious delays in the publication of the *Quarterly Cumulative Index Medicus*. Also, though changes in the presentation of the *Current List of Medical Literature* have made this publication of greater value to medical libraries, there is still, especially for European libraries, an inevitable delay in the receipt and indexing of non-American periodicals. For these reasons the WHO Library is now regularly scrutinizing 965 periodicals in eighteen languages and indexing on cards, by author and subject, the articles of interest to WHO. Duplicate cards are sent regularly to all WHO specialists who wish to be kept informed of current articles in their subjects, which means that on an average some four thousand cards are prepared each month.

An analytical index is also compiled for WHO publications and documents and for all the publications and documents of the United Nations and Specialized Agencies which are of particular interest to WHO.

The *Library News*, which was started in May 1947, is a monthly mimeographed document of about twenty pages. It consists of a list of the books received and cataloged during the preceding month, the periodicals newly received, the annual government publications added to the library, and the bibliographies prepared. From time to time supplements are issued containing selected lists of books and periodicals on subjects of special interest to WHO. The *Library News* is distributed free of charge to members of the WHO Secretariat in Geneva, to the WHO regional offices, and, on request, to medical libraries and universities.

During the past five years WHO has furnished considerable quantities of medical literature to Member Governments for libraries of medical and health institutions, especially those concerned with the education and training of professional, technical, and other public-health personnel. The number of books supplied had, by the end of 1951, exceeded 22,000, while nearly 9,000 periodical subscriptions, as well as many hundreds of reprints, photocopies, and microfilms had been provided. This has assisted in replacing collections destroyed or damaged during the war, in rehabilitating inadequate or outdated libraries, and in furnishing nuclear collections to countries where standards of medical education and of health services are below average. It has served to keep up to date in basic medical literature, libraries in countries with very limited funds to spend in external purchases.

Special literature recommended by the appropriate technical sections of WHO is also ordered through the library and sent to the WHO advisory and demonstration teams working in the field. For the members of those teams cut off from ready access to medical literature, the WHO Library has a special responsibility and provides, wherever possible, photocopies or microfilms of the literature required.

While the supply of current medical literature is an indispensable aid to the development of health services, that is but one part of a complete library service as conducted by trained professional librarians. WHO has acknowledged its responsibilities to assist in the preparation of medical librarians by granting fellowships to medical librarians to study outside their own country. Four such fellowships have already been granted, and three of the fellows have spent a portion of their period of study working in the WHO Library.

Another important development was the appointment of a medical library consultant to the WHO Regional Office for Europe, to survey

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and report upon the several medical libraries in European countries. It is expected that other WHO regional offices survey medical and public-health library facilities within their area. The present goal is to build up at least one adequate medical library in each country. These central medical libraries would be expected to provide advice and services to other national medical and public-health libraries and to take the initiative in establishing a union list of periodicals and a system of interlibrary cooperation in acquisitions and loans.

The place of medical library services in the work of WHO is still in the experimental stage. So far, for very good and obvious reasons, this service has tended to face inward and to have concentrated on the task of providing the WHO specialist quickly and efficiently with the material and information he requires. This may meet WHO's needs but not the needs of the world. The appointment of a medical library consultant to the WHO Regional Office for Europe and the granting of medical library fellowships, however, are indications of possible future developments. They are indications, too, of the growing realization by WHO Member Governments of the essential role of medical libraries in the development of adequate health services.