NATIONAL LIBRARY OF MEDICINE: ITS INTERNATIONAL PROGRAMMES AND SERVICES

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Outlines the information programmes of the National Library of Medicine, primarily oriented towards international biomedical communication network, and traditional exchange of literature which has been extended to collaborative arrangements with technically advanced countries for NLM’s computerised information systems. Discusses the technical consultations and resources provided by NLM for the establishment of national and regional biomedical information centres.

The international programmes and services of the National Library of Medicine (NLM) are based on a cooperative sharing of services, and can be characterised in six general categories—

- Literature Exchange Programmes
- Library Services
- Special Foreign Currency Programme
- MEDLARS Cooperative Arrangements
- Technical Consultations and Cooperation with International Organisation.

They are a blend of activities with a variety of mechanisms for execution but all have the common objective of direct benefit to the medical community.

LITERATURE EXCHANGE PROGRAMMES

The library has 400 exchange partners in 72 countries throughout the world from whom considerable material is acquired and exchanged. These exchange partners now include USSR, Cuba and the Peoples Republic of China. The basis of this strong exchange programme was conceptually laid down with the historic commissioning of Dr. John Shaw Billings in 1881 to visit a number of libraries on the European continent.

LIBRARY SERVICES

The Library has responded to international requests for traditional information services. From 1966 to 1978, NLM had a special arrangement with the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) to provide annually approximately 30,000 services to 48 developing countries throughout the world. These include inter-library loans, reference services, MEDLINE searches, subscription to Index Medicus, Abridged Index Medicus and NLM Current Catalog. These services proved to be of great value in those countries where modern medical information is unavailable because of inadequate facilities, collections and staff.

The broad geographical distribution of these NLM/AID services was approximately 64% in respect to Asia, 33% to Latin America and 3% to Africa in 1978. The subject matter extended over all aspects of health - delivery of primary health care, education and research - and covered broad topics such as nutrition, environment, communicable diseases as well as speciality areas.

SPECIAL FOREIGN CURRENCY PROGRAMME (PL480)

NLM’s Special Foreign Currency Programme is authorised by PL 83-480 whereby funds accrued to United States by the sale of surplus agricultural commodities are spent in the country of origin on projects mutually beneficial to both countries. NLM initiated programme in India, Pakistan, Poland, Yugoslavia, Israel, Egypt and Tunisia. To start with, these programmes produced translations of the specialised biomedical literature from Russian, Polish etc. into English so that the information therein would be available to the scientists in U.S.
In 1964 the NLM began to change the character and emphasis of this programme from the translation activity to the development of bibliographic tools useful for medical community engaged in research, education and practice. Many health-related directories, hand books, monographs, histories of medicine and critical reviews have resulted from special Foreign Currency Programme.

MEDLARS COOPERATIVE ARRANGEMENTS

The MEDLARS data base and Index Medicus are international in character. The 2,598 serials covered by Index Medicus represent 30 languages and 73 countries. Out of these, 59% serials are in English only and are produced in 49 countries. English is also the primary language in 63% of the 365 multilingual journals. Forty eight countries other than United States publish medical literature primarily in English indicating that there has been a shift towards English as a language of biomedical publications.

Because of the nature of the data base, many countries were interested in obtaining MEDLARS computer tapes as soon as the system became operational in 1964. The NLM began international cooperation with U.K. and Sweden for their experimental testing of NLM's new computerised system. With the successful operation of the scheme with U.K. and Sweden, it became clear to NLM and was agreeable to other countries, that definite bilateral agreements would be desirable. NLM now has bilateral agreements with Pan American Health Organisation and ten other cooperating countries, namely, Germany, Japan, Sweden, U.K., Australia, France, Canada, Italy, Mexico and South Africa. The arrangement was discontinued with Iran in Jan. 1979.

NLM makes available the MEDLARS system either through tapes or online access to NLM computer. The participating country must meet the technical criteria involving personnel, equipment and monetary resources and have a user community large enough to justify an extensive computerised service activity. The participating country then provides and funds the indexing of journal articles for inputting to MEDLARS data base and in return gets access to the system.

These international agreements are evaluated periodically by International MEDLARS Policy Advisory Group (IMPAG) which consists of representatives from NLM and the countries with a MEDLARS Centre to ensure continuing technical and professional benefit. NLM has called five IMPAG meetings since 1972 to examine the nature of cooperation, operational experience, new data bases, regional coverage and future cooperation.

TECHNICAL CONSULTATIONS

Nations are becoming increasingly aware of the value of scientific and technical information. NLM often assists in the designing of national biomedical information centres or imparts specialised training and work experience to individuals. The Library is often called upon for other technical consultations by organisations concerned with developing a regional approach to solving information problems. Problems of many countries would require action relating primarily to medical setting, such as strengthening of basic collection of libraries, the training of library staff and the relationship between medical librarian and physician to increase the awareness on the part of the medical community of the value of a modern medical library.

COOPERATION WITH INTERNATIONAL ORGANISATIONS

NLM has varying degree of involvement with a number of international organisations, both government and non-government, scientific and non-scientific. These include the United Nations; the UN’s specialised agencies which have a health or scientific orientation such as World Health Organisation (WHO), Pan American Health Organisation (PAHO) and United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO), economic organisations such as Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD); and scientific agencies such as International Council of Scientific Unions-Abstracting Board (ICSU-AB).

NLM’s involvement is often derived from its experience in biomedical communications and the international organisation’s efforts to relate this experience to larger questions of special significance.
BIBLIOGRAPHY


