Hospital Library Consortia: A Vital Component of Hospital-Wide Education

by KAREN J. GRAVES and KAY MILLS DUNAVENT

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In the last decade there has been an increased interest in providing continuing education for health professionals. The responsibility for this type of education was first placed with medical universities and professional associations, but recently more responsibility has been placed on the "front line" of health care—the hospital itself.1,2 This shift in emphasis is illustrated by policy statements from several health care organizations and accrediting agencies. The Joint Commission for Accreditation of Hospitals incorporated requirements for hospital-based continuing education programs in its standards in 1970.3 Since then, various professional associations have urged their members to participate in continuing education programs and some require periodic recertification. The American Hospital Association House of Delegates issued a policy statement in 1974 which advised hospitals to provide education for personnel involved in patient care.3 Government-legislated Professional Standards Review Organizations are also requiring that educational components be built into review programs. Continuing education is recognized as an integral part of the professional career in health, and continuing education in the hospital setting is becoming accepted as essential for quality patient care.

The need for continuing education is well-established; the problem currently facing hospitals is how to satisfy that need. While hospital administrators may agree that continuing education is vital, how does a hospital on a limited budget create a hospital-wide education program that will provide needed printed matter and audiovisual hardware and software? Although there can be no way to avoid a substantial outlay of money for good educational programs, many administrators and educators may be overlooking the resources that are already available through their own hospital library and the financial savings that may result from sharing with other health institutions through a library consortium.

In this paper we describe how a hospital library consortium can enhance the educational programs of a health institution by providing information and materials that assist hospital educators in curricula planning. A library consortium can minimize the time involved in obtaining needed information by creating a referral network that coordinates available resources and services. We illustrate the benefits of a hospital library consortium with an explanation of similarities between procedures already in use by librarians and of processes involved in preparing a health education program. We also emphasize the economic advantages that result when the hospital library is made an integral part of educational planning.

LIBRARY COOPERATION

Cooperative efforts are clearly the focus of
the future. Sharing is not a new concept and has been successfully used in other hospital services and departments. There are well-established health education consortia which share the expertise and educational resources of the member institutions; however, very little mention has been made of the library's or librarian's role in this program. The results of this oversight are well-illustrated by a recent national survey of hospital trainers in which 29% of the persons responsible for in-service education listed a need for further outside information resources. Outside resources are indeed already available to hospital personnel through the biomedical communication network made up of health science libraries across the country.

Few hospital departments have benefited from a nationally coordinated system as much as the hospital library has from the biomedical communication network now in operation. The Medical Library Assistance Act of 1965 resulted in the Regional Medical Library Program and created a medical library network with guidelines for sharing in such areas of library operations as interlibrary loans and consultations. In addition to providing a hierarchical arrangement for information referrals, the National Library of Medicine has also stressed the formation of consortia by hospital libraries and has provided funds to build collections in these libraries, thus making local cooperation possible and feasible.

The American Hospital Association recognized the capabilities of the network as a whole and the hospital library in particular in this statement:

The health science library is a vital center serving the hospital's objectives of patient care, education and research...Its true value to the hospital lies in its ability to identify and provide information to all who need it.

Thus "...ability to identify and provide information..." is the talent which each hospital librarian can offer to each hospital's struggle to provide continuing education. Within the realm of a local hospital library consortium the goal of good educational programs can be realized without waste of time, effort, or money.

THE ASSOCIATION OF MEMPHIS AREA HEALTH SCIENCE LIBRARIES

The Association of Memphis Area Health Science Libraries was established in March 1975, to provide continuing education opportunities for health science librarians in the Memphis area. As our knowledge of basic library skills and services increased through monthly workshops, we were able to shift our emphasis to sharing concepts and to developing policies and procedures to make sharing feasible. For instance, our publication of a list of the members' journal holdings identifies exactly what is available in the health-related libraries in the city and lessens the need to send loan requests to libraries out of town. The wide variety of types of libraries in our group has broadened the available journal resources without any increase in subscription expense.

While the membership of our consortium may be unique (see Appendix), any consortium will include different types of libraries with diverse subject emphases, and will provide access to an increased number of subject specialists available for authoritative consultation. The creation of a local library consortium has not only proved to be of professional educational value to the medical librarians in the city but has also opened new dimensions for information retrieval to all health professionals in the member institutions.

HOW THE LIBRARY CONSORTIUM FITS INTO EDUCATIONAL PROGRAMS

The educational programs in each of our member institutions obviously benefit from the broader base of available journals and expertise described above. A hospital library consortium can also provide assistance in more specific areas of the educational process such as: (1) helping instructors plan their curricula through retrospective searches in the subject areas to be taught; (2) current awareness searches for new educational and subject materials; (3) acquisition and evaluation of training material; (4) coordination and organization of records through central cataloging; and (5) coordination of materials through cooperative acquisitions. These areas are described below.

(1) Every educator goes through the time-consuming process of researching for each class. To aid in this process the librarian has indexes and abstracts available and can provide manual or computer searches of the biomedical literature. Efficient use of indexes yields specific information on the subjects to be taught as well as information on educational programs that have been tested and proven effective. This saving of time and, ultimately, of money by using services offered by the librarian is
illustrated in this statement by Schecter:

It is economically inefficient for each trainer in a hospital to perform the necessary searches particularly in view of the fact that some hospitals have as many as 200 occupational titles for which materials might be available.13

Duplication of effort can be minimized even further when the librarian in each institution within a consortium maintains a file of recent subject searches performed and circulates that file to all other consortium members.

(2) Current awareness services are already provided by libraries to physicians who are directly responsible for patient care and to researchers. A consortium is capable of providing additional services in the case of educators. These awareness services would not only include print and nonprint materials, but new services and resource people available within the local scientific community. Awareness of new materials often serves as the first step in the acquisition process for educators.

(3) Acquiring print and nonprint materials is another duty routinely performed by librarians that can be useful to educational program planners. Librarians already have the necessary reference tools and reference search techniques to find new educational information. Librarians also have established liaisons with experts in many specialities who regularly give advice on library purchases and who can be called upon when needed for help with evaluation of educational materials. A comparison and evaluation of types of audio-visual hardware is also possible, which is especially helpful when the purchase of new, expensive equipment is being considered.

(4) The effective organization of available materials in an institution is necessary for rapid access to information. This organization is made possible only by maintaining a central record in the library. Such a record can prevent unnecessary duplication within an institution and can also provide for the sharing of materials between departments. An integrated institutional catalog enables all personnel in a hospital to have access to material that is housed in the areas where it is most often used. This same organizational concept can be carried one step further—each member in the consortium should have access to the central records of materials of all other members. These central records can be incorporated into one city-wide catalog but this is not essential as long as communication exists between mem-

bers and access to institutional records is available.

(5) Cooperative acquisition of material ranging from actually pooling money and forming a centralized collection of print and nonprint to loaning audio-visual hardware or software has been successfully initiated in several library consortia.14-15 Our consortium has not found this cooperative purchasing feasible for our situation. Instead, the Memphis library consortium shares lists of each member's recent acquisitions; through these listings each member is aware of new books, journals, and software available for loan. In an atmosphere where trade-offs occur, each institution does not have the financial burden of purchasing every good instructional package for each program. As a result, institutions have the freedom to develop their specialized subject areas while meeting their responsibility to provide access to educational information for all health professionals.

CONCLUSION

We believe that including the hospital library in an institution's education program greatly enhances the quality of the program, and decreases the total cost by minimizing duplication of effort and materials. To ensure the library's participation, each librarian must take the initiative by informing educators and administrators of the types of information and services available from local health science libraries and from the national biomedical communication network. The librarian must ask for and be permitted to have an active part in the educational program. By being included in the planning of curricula, the librarian will be better prepared to meet the information needs of health care educators. The library can then effectively serve as a switching station, channeling new and pertinent information to any instructor.

The educators and administrators who look to the library for help with the continuing education program must realize that the librarian should be the information coordinator only, and not the coordinator for the entire program. The librarian can make specific contributions to educational programs in the institutions by maintaining communication with outside resources. One hospital library alone can never meet the entire needs of a hospital-wide education program; however, the hospital library consortium concept is one way to close
the gap and provide a framework for the sharing of information and for broadening the base of available information and talent.

Sharing is not always easy to accomplish. Institutional schedules must be maintained, institutional users must have precedence, and responsibility for expensive equipment and materials must be accepted. The benefits derived from sharing make the attempt worthwhile and once communication lines are established, rules and procedures can be formulated to minimize problems.

A hospital library consortium can provide the mechanism for increased sharing among institutions. If a local hospital library consortium is unavailable to the educators, the administrator and his fellow administrators should supply the needed stimulus by supporting initial efforts for communication among local institutions. Continued administrative support will ensure the success of shared programs and services.

It is the duty of the hospital librarian to place information in the hands of those who need it. As a result of increased demands for information, access to outside resources is a vital component of hospital-wide education. With the help of both the local hospital library consortium and the national biomedical communication network, librarians can help create an educational program that improves patient care—the ultimate goal of all in the health care field.

REFERENCES

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APPENDIX

MEMBERSHIP LIST of the
ASSOCIATION of MEMPHIS AREA HEALTH SCIENCE LIBRARIES

Baptist Memorial Hospital
Baptist Memorial Hospital School of Nursing
Buckman Laboratories, Inc. (Chemical)
Campbell Clinic (Orthopedics)
City of Memphis Hospital
Memphis Mental Health Institute
Memphis Regional Medical Program
Memphis & Shelby County Health Department
Methodist Hospital
St. Joseph Hospital—Downtown
St. Joseph Hospital—East
St. Jude Children’s Research Hospital
Semmes Murphey Clinic (Neurology)
Southern College of Optometry
University of Tennessee Center for the Health Sciences Biomedical Communication Department
University of Tennessee Center for the Health Sciences Library
Veterans Administration Hospital

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