National Library of Medicine Regional Medical Library Program

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ABSTRACT

The National Library of Medicine is charged with the development and management of a National Biomedical Communications Network. The Regional Medical Library Program is a forerunner of such a network; the product and institutions involved will be critical elements in its evolution. The immediate objective of the RMLP, the facilitation of biomedical information transfer, presents a logistical problem requiring substantial commitment from the health sciences community and extensive cooperation among libraries in each region.

The National Library of Medicine is committed to the utilization of its resources in support of health science service, education, and research. It is charged with the development and management of a National Biomedical Communications Network to facilitate the distribution of information, promote the sharing of resources, and provide a forum for the exchange of ideas and the demonstration of innovations in the applications of modern communications technology.

The Regional Medical Library Program provides the opportunity to study the service problems using a widely accepted traditional product (the biomedical literature) and existing institutions (biomedical libraries) which have a well-developed organization and discipline (library science) and are possessed of great experience and dedicated to service. This model contains most of the elements which will be operative in any future Biomedical Communications Network. Finally, the product and the institutions involved will be critical elements in the evolution of such a network.

The term network is defined by Webster as a series of interlacing connections utilized for common purposes. Some interlacing connections already exist, others are being built, still others are being planned. Therefore, the applicability of the definition resides in the pursuit of common purposes. What common purposes?

The legislative history of the Medical Library Assistance Act of 1965 and its extension in 1970, indicates a belief by Congress that more rapid and widespread access to information would contribute significantly to a societal purpose of quality health care for all. The importance of information transfer in achieving this societal purpose needs no defending; however, if this purpose is to be achieved, it must be through institutions which have objectives that may be in conflict with or at least tangential to this goal. Fortunately, libraries are created with service as an objective. But biomedical libraries are rarely freestanding, and their objectives cannot be divorced from those of their parent institutions. At times, at least in terms of priorities—if not specific objectives—conflict may arise. The resolution of such conflicts can be treated lightly so long as we remain in the realm of abstractions. But the Regional Medical Library Program is designed to become an operating model by means of which the abstractions become concrete.

No matter how organized, the program makes immediate demands for resources and facilities, for the establishment of priorities and, therefore, for specific commitments. These commitments are neither insignificant nor transient, and if made will undoubtedly influence institutions' orientation. It is our belief that in the long run the institutional objectives will also be better served; they will gain more than they give up. But even if this optimistic appraisal is unchallenged, can they make the commitments essential to the immediate growth and development of the Regional Medical Library Program?
Administratively, the Regional Medical Library Program is conceived of as an hierarchical structure. The National Library of Medicine coordinates management and establishes policy through its Board of Regents with advice from its consultants. This "policy" is really a statement of objectives and a set of broad operational guidelines implied by those objectives.

The implementation of this policy, the adaptation of these guidelines to the unique situation of each region, and decisions concerned with all such operations within the region, are the responsibility of the Regional Medical Libraries. To discharge this responsibility, they must elicit and secure the commitment, coordinate the inputs, and reconcile the differences of the entire health science community.

It is appropriate to phrase this role in such a manner, for only then is the magnitude of the task apparent. It cannot be accomplished by uncoordinated, unplanned, undisciplined meandering through uncharted seas nor by cautious maneuvering designed to keep the familiar coastline always in view.

The Regional Medical Library Program has as its immediate objective the facilitation of information transfer. At the moment, the vast majority of that information is packaged in the form of the medical literature. We are confronted with a logistical problem with nationwide dimensions. It is that logistical problem that must be solved. To do that we must specifically define the network's obligations. These definitions may not be entirely satisfactory from a professional point of view, but they are operational necessities. What documents are going to be delivered, to whom, and under what circumstances? What reference services shall initially be organized and delivered on a regional basis? How should this structure be financed initially and ultimately? What are our priorities for our resources?

These and many other questions require answers. We need to open up the dialogue, obtain data, do appropriate analysis, and most of all we need to understand the implications of our undertakings. To this end, Dr. Pings (Bull. Med. Libr. Assoc. 60: 274–283, Apr. 1972) makes an admirable beginning in his analysis of the Regional Medical Library Program Policy Statement. The Regional Medical Library Program must solve a logistical problem on a nationwide basis. The National Library of Medicine believes that the optimal solution to this problem involves regional coordination both with regard to document delivery and future developments in information transfer. For effective implementation, the professional librarian must contribute his expertise to the development and planning for network goals and not merely represent the interests of his own institution. Concern for the optimal development of service to the region must overshadow the more limited institutional perspective.