Starved of information

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Many universities and other medical institutions in the Third World, especially Africa, have bought few if any medical books over the past few years. Not because they don't need them: they are starved of information. They just can't afford them. You can't sell books in such areas unless they can be produced (and delivered) for less than £3. One of the few organisations that have assimilated this fact—and done something about it—is TALC (Teaching Aids at Low Cost), a charitable organisation based in St Albans which by running on incredibly low overheads distributes cheap high quality books, slides, and simple health "accessories" to countries all over the Third World. Currently it sends out about 14 000 slide sets a year and 50 000 books. This makes it the biggest single exporter in Britain of health training materials to the Third World.

One of the slides from the set "weaning foods and energy," putting across the concept that oil is used to increase the energy concentration of porridge and reduce the bulk of food eaten by the child.

Each slide set consists of 24 slides and a script and at £2.00 costs no more than a Kodak colour film. For those who can afford it sets of slides with tapes are available for £13.00 (both prices are those quoted for developing countries; British purchasers must expect to pay more). The topics covered range from breast feeding and weaning problems to the management of kwashiorkor and use of contraceptives. The books, of which there are over 50, also cover a wide range of health, nutrition, and community health issues. They are seldom commissioned, most being written by enthusiasts with a message, who have had experience in developing countries, are willing to write and not to take royalties, and understand that their message must be put over in simple English to those for whom English is a second language. TALC's "accessories" include simple plastic spoons with sugar and salt measures to help mothers make up oral rehydration solutions (10 for £1.10), arm circumference tapes, anaemia recognition cards, growth charts, flannelgraphs, and a simplified weighing scale that uses an accurate spring that stretches 1 cm for every 1 kg applied (£5 for a complete kit, 80p for the spring alone). Many of these products are available with instructions written in English, French, Portuguese, Spanish, Arabic, and even Chinese.

TALC boasts no glossy office in its home town of St Albans, just a kitchen in the house of the one full time member of the organisation, who together with 26 other housewives who work part time distributes TALC's products to about 6500 different outlets overseas. TALC also has the benefit of input from a doctor who ensures that the scripts that accompany the slides are accurate and

easy to understand. In addition, it has the back up of Professor David Morley, who has been the key figure in its evolution, and the Tropical Child Health Unit at the Institute of Child Health, London. The institute stocks the full range of TALC products and welcomes 4000 or so visitors a year from overseas, who come to view the slides, listen to tapes, leaf through books, etc.

As a charitable organisation TALC depends on financial support from organisations that share its belief in the importance of providing health education information at low cost to Third World countries. At present this support comes largely from the Swedish International Development Authority (SIDA). It seems that the British based organisations have been less forthcoming despite the fact that there can be few better examples of private enterprise than TALC, which has identified a need, met it, and kept its operating costs to a minimum by basing the organisation within a community. It is this factor of which Professor Morley is justly proud; "after all," he said, "there can't be many university departments that have such a fruitful liaison with a community... far too many universities spend all their time talking only to other universities."

There has to be a message there. Meanwhile, those in ivory towers contemplating the glossy covers of their recent £50 masterpiece might pause and ask who is going to read this; could there, should there have been a wider audience; and how could it have been reached? Our obsession with dwindling budgets should not prevent us from appreciating that in the Third World "lack of funds" takes on a different perspective. Organisations such as TALC deserve more support from home teams, and perhaps it is time that we all spared a thought as to how we might do our bit to make Health for All by the year 2000 more than a hackneyed slogan epitomising the triumph of hope over experience.

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