REPORT / RAPPORT

The Fourth Regional Conference on EMR Health Sciences Virtual Library: Role in e-Learning and Building the Information Society, Cairo, Egypt, 23–25 November 2004

It gives me great pleasure to submit this report to the *Journal of the Canadian Health Libraries Association*.

My membership in the Canadian Health Libraries Association / Association des bibliothèques de la santé du Canada (CHLA / ABSC) and my interaction with Canadian health librarians has helped me enhance my skills and knowledge. When I attended the annual CHLA / ABSC conferences in Edmonton, Alta. (2003) and St. John's, N.L. (2004), I noticed that Canadian health librarians were interested in the activities, facilities, services, and experiences of health sciences libraries in the Eastern Mediterranean region (EMR). At the same time, health librarians in the EMR would like to network and exchange views with librarians in North America.

One of the great achievements of CHLA / ABSC was the creation of interest groups, which took place in July 2004. The sharing of experiences and ideas through networking with librarians from different countries, cultures, and environments will engender a spirit of cooperation. This will lead to the sharing of information and resources among libraries and to the organization of different programs and projects (e.g., donation programs for libraries that lack resources and funds).

Health sciences libraries in the EMR are a community that supports health care professionals by providing library services, activities, and facilities to simplify access to health information. The World Health Organization – Eastern Mediterranean Regional Office (WHO–EMRO) plays an important role in supporting this community. Dr. Najeeb Al-Shorbaji, Regional Advisor, Health Information Management and Telecommunications, organized a series of regional conferences on health sciences libraries in Lebanon, Iran, Pakistan, and Egypt. The number of attendees at each of these conferences was approximately 150–250. Physicians occasionally attend and present talks at these conferences. Dr. Shorbaji established the first Listserv for health sciences librarians in the EMR based on the lists of participants at these conferences. I announce CHLA / ABSC activities on this Listserv, so many librarians are aware of CHLA / ABSC's annual conferences and other opportunities.

The Fourth Regional Conference was organized by the Regional Office in Cairo and was held on 23–25 November 2004. The conference was preceded by a 1-day national congress of Egyptian medical librarians. The national congress was attended by some 140 participants from health sciences libraries affiliated with the Egyptian Ministry of Health and Population, research centers, and health sciences colleges.

All countries in the EMR were invited to nominate participants to the regional conference. A total of 44 participants from 17 EMR countries participated in the conference as well as 4 staff members from WHO Headquarters and regional offices. Dr. Jama, Deputy Regional Director, delivered the Regional Director's message to the conference. Dr. Assaedi, Assistant Regional Director, attended the opening session and welcomed the participants.

Forty-four presentations were made during the conference, including two videoconferences. Enough time was allotted to present and discuss all the presentations that originally appeared in the conference programme. An evaluation form was developed and distributed to participants to acquire feedback on all aspects of the conference. Participants in the two events expressed their gratitude to the Regional Office for organizing the two meetings and for continuing to support health information and health sciences libraries in the EMR.

I presented two papers at this conference. The first was entitled "How can you enhance your skills and library practice at your own desk?" The paper discussed the opportunities for health sciences librarians to learn via distance education (i.e., television and radio broadcast, videoconferencing, online learning, and satellite teleconferencing). I included the role of the Medical Library Association and CHLA / ABSC in e-learning opportunities and CHLA / ABSC's future plans in this regard based on the feedback of the CHLA / ABSC continuing education survey.

The second paper was entitled "Virtual reference desk (VRD): @sk a health sciences librarian in the region". I recommended establishing a VRD in the EMR, sponsored by WHO–EMRO through a consortium among several libraries, which would serve health care professionals in the region 24 hours a day, 7 days a week.

Participants at the conference made the following conclusions and (or) recommendations for future actions:

(1) The conference has established itself as one of the major events in health information management in the region and has been able to bring together health information specialists from across the region. It was recommended that the conference continue to be held on a regular basis and that participation be open to the widest possible range of health information professionals and medical education specialists.

(2) The training and education of medical librarians have been recognized as major factors in defining the quality of health information services and its impact on health

services. It was recommended that the newly established postgraduate program in medical librarianship in Oman be supported and that other countries in the EMR should be encouraged to establish similar programs. It was recommended that WHO–EMRO conduct a formal evaluation of the program and maintain the quality of the curriculum.

(3) Although the networking effort led by the Regional Office and the collaboration of many libraries in the region was commended, participants urged the Regional Office to allocate more resources to support national initiatives and requested that all member countries commit resources and more involvement in regional and global efforts.

(4) The work of the Regional Office in the development of the Union Catalogue of Medical Journals in the EMR was highly appreciated. Participants recommended a specialized short training course on the operation and maintenance of the database, development of training materials that would be available on the Internet, linkage of the database to other databases and resources (especially authors and institutions), and promotion among health care professionals and institutions in the region (the target audience of this service).

(5) Networking services and information services provided by the Virtual Health Sciences Library have been used extensively by many professionals and libraries. It was recommended that the Regional Office and member libraries publicize these services by promoting them at national and regional meetings, exchanging Web site links, distributing leaflets, encouraging open access, and developing versions in different languages.

(6) Participants took note of the newly launched initiative on the development of a Global Health Library by WHO. Participants welcomed the initiative and expressed a willingness to be part of this effort. Also mentioned was the need to have more clarity on objectives, methods of work, mechanisms for networking, tools, resources, and role definition.

(7) Participants appreciated the Health InterNetwork Access to Research Initiative (HINARI), the WHO-led initiative on the access to medical journals, especially for countries in a difficult economic situation. Participants expressed concern that many countries that are entitled to access HINARI, according to the criteria, are not given access. The conference recommended that WHO and its regional offices request that the consortium review its policies and provide some solutions for these countries. These countries expressed a readiness to share the cost.

(8) The role of the virtual library in e-learning was recognized by information specialists and health care professionals at the conference. Participants recommended that the two groups of professionals work together to develop

materials, improve access to collections, and increase awareness of the value of e-learning. It was recommended that WHO–EMRO develop an inventory of e-learning courses, resources, and events in the region.

(9) The virtual library can be fully functional and operational only if information resources are made available electronically and in digital format. Participants urged all libraries in the region to develop plans and implement digitization projects for their collections. The conference recommended that all medical journals in the region publish their electronic equivalent on the Internet.

(10) The emergence of the information society and knowledge economy is both a challenge and an opportunity for health information professionals and medical librarians. To ensure that health information and e-health information are well represented at the World Summit on the Information Society (WSIS), participants recommended that ministries of health and medical education institutions in the region ensure a strong presence at the Regional Commissions and at the WSIS. Since content is what matters in the information society, the role of health information professionals in collaborating with health care professionals should be enhanced through institutional and national efforts to make health information available on the Internet in appropriate formats and languages.

(11) The conference took note of the forthcoming Ninth International Congress on Medical Librarianship (ICML) to be held in Brazil on 20–23 September 2005. Participation in ICML by librarians from the region should be supported by the EMRO, governments in the region, and health care institutions.

(12) The results of the survey entitled "Use of Internet and e-mail by physicians in the region" revealed that most physicians use the Internet at home, which was interpreted as indicating a lack of Internet access at the physicians' workplaces. Participants recommended that efforts should be made by all health care institutions and medical education institutions to provide an information and communication infrastructure and specifically to link their libraries to the Internet. These efforts should be encouraged and supported by WHO and EMRO. Access to the Internet would provide access to free, high-quality health information resources.

For more information about EMRO's continued support of health sciences libraries in the region, please visit http://www.emro.who.int/.

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