

MLA Certification:

The Certification Program and Education for Medical Librarianship*

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ABSTRACT

The certification program was formally adopted by the Medical Library Association in 1948 in an attempt to establish standards for medical librarians. The program is reviewed, and some of its effects on education for medical librarians are discussed. At the time of its adoption the program defined the kind of education librarians in the field thought necessary for work in medical libraries. New techniques and a shortage of personnel demand consideration of new educational programs, and the Medical Library Assistance Act will provide the means for their establishment. The Association should assume leadership in determining what and where these programs should be and should evaluate its certification and standards programs as often as current needs require.

THE standards program, of which the certification program is a part, had its beginning at the 1946 annual meeting in New Haven, Connecticut. At that meeting Mary Louise Marshall's presidential address was on training for medical librarians and the prevailing lack of standards. She named three factors as equally important in bringing qualified persons to the profession: (1) recruitment, (2) education, both general and professional, and (3) experience, preferably supervised, as represented by an internship. She further pointed out that as long as the Association had no training program or recognized standards it had no basis for concerted action (1). After a long and spirited discussion, a Committee on a Training Program for Medical Librarians was appointed to make recommendations at the next annual meeting.

During the year the Committee formulated a

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questionnaire which was mailed to the administrators of each library belonging to the Association and, in addition, to each professional member who would not be reached as the head of a library (2). Overwhelmingly, these medical librarians expressed the need for special instruction in medical bibliography subsequent to some technical library training and stated that this should be followed by a period of supervised experience in a medical library. Results of the questionnaire also indicated almost unanimous approval of the adoption of a certification program; 91 of the 128 persons who replied favored it, 14 did not favor it, and the remainder expressed no opinion.

At the 1947 annual meeting the Committee presented its recommendations based upon the opinions expressed in the questionnaire. It recommended training at three levels (3):

- Grade I. Library school training with work in library administration, medical bibliography, etc. (It was hoped that the cooperation of three library schools could be secured in offering courses in medical bibliography—one school in the East, one in the Middle West, and one in the Far West—and it was suggested that about twenty persons could be absorbed in the field annually).
- Grade II. Requirements for Grade I plus six months' experience under an approved librarian.
- Grade III. Training leading to an advanced degree or its equivalent.

As an adjunct, the Committee recommended a plan of certification at the three grades.

Again the discussion was long and heated. The

arguments of proponents of certification were later summarized in an article by Mildred Jordan as follows: (1) it would serve as a method of establishing minimum standards and training for the group, thus assuring a higher level of service to the medical public; (2) it would assist in marking the boundaries between professional and nonprofessional personnel working in libraries; (3) it might induce new workers in the field to meet the educational standards established by the Association, while serving as a means of recognizing older members of the profession who met the standards; (4) it would establish standards useful to administrators and accrediting bodies concerned with medical libraries; and (5) it would lend prestige to the profession and improve working conditions (4).

The views of opponents to certification were voiced in a minority report by Sanford V. Larky: (1) medical libraries vary greatly as to function and size, and, as a corollary, the qualifications necessary for workers in various types of libraries differ; (2) the disparity between Charter and Grade Certification would be too great; and (3) the role of the Medical Library Association as an accrediting body was open to question (5).

The Committee's recommendations for training were finally adopted unanimously, but, because no agreement could be reached on the proposed certification program, the matter was tabled and a committee was appointed to study it further.

At the 1948 annual meeting the Committee on Training for Medical Librarianship again recommended that a certification program be adopted which would include Charter Certification for those who had had five years of experience by April 1, 1954, when Charter Certification was to be closed; Certification at Grades I, II, and III, corresponding to the levels of medical library training approved by the Association the previous year; and Special Certification, in exceptional cases, of those presenting credentials other than the ones specified (6). This program was adopted, and the name of the Committee on Training was changed to Committee on Standards for Medical Librarianship, with Subcommittees on Recruitment, Curriculum, Internship, and Certification.

The Committee and the Association were then faced with the problem of implementing the program. They had to encourage the establishment of

courses in medical librarianship, decide what these courses should cover, persuade medical libraries to offer internships, and seek to provide scholarships and subsidies.

In the first year of its existence, the Subcommittee on Curriculum defined its scope as investigation into the education of medical librarians along formal lines, including the goals such education should have and the method of attaining these goals. As an initial step a questionnaire was distributed to selected librarians (7). Information from the questionnaire and collection and analysis of data on library education from other sources formed the basis for the Subcommittee's "Minimum Standards for the Training of Medical Librarians," which has been revised a number of times to meet changing conditions. "Minimum Standards" is designed as a guide in the organization and administration of courses and is used as a measuring stick in approving or disapproving courses offered.

When the certification program was adopted, a course in medical librarianship was being offered at Columbia University. In addition, in 1949 and 1950 the Veterans Administration arranged for intensive short-term courses in medicine and medical bibliography for its medical librarians at four universities. These Veterans Administration courses were not offered again after 1950, possibly because the number of courses in medical librarianship regularly scheduled in library schools began to increase rapidly. Between 1951 and the present time, nine courses have been established in library schools throughout the country, bringing the total number of courses now offered to ten. Each is taught by a medical librarian, and each has been reviewed every five years by the Subcommittee on Curriculum. In addition to providing guidance in establishing these courses, the Medical Library Association has offered a number of scholarships each year.

Like the Subcommittee on Curriculum, the Subcommittee on Internships set as its first goal the establishment of standards. In 1949 it drew up requirements for a library which might give intern training, requirements for librarians applying for internships, and a general outline of the training that should be offered (8, 9). The Subcommittee also sent out questionnaires to selected libraries in an effort to determine how many libraries were qualified to offer internships.

There were two internship programs in existence at the time, one at Tulane and one at Van-

derbilt. In 1952 both programs were approved retroactively. In its statement of approval the Subcommittee noted:

The establishment and carrying through of an internship program requires much time and effort on the part of the librarian and the other staff members of the teaching library. Indeed, it cannot be done without their willingness to sacrifice many of their own desires in order to further this program of training for medical librarianship. . . . These two libraries, with one intern apiece each year, can provide a most limited amount of training, not sufficient to meet the demand (10).

Both Vanderbilt and Tulane discontinued their programs, and from 1957 until 1961 the only program available was offered by the National Library of Medicine. In 1961 the U. S. Public Health Service awarded five-year grants for graduate training to the A. W. Calhoun Medical Library, Emory University School of Medicine, and to the Biomedical Library, University of California, Los Angeles. In 1964 the Library of the National Institutes of Health established a training program for library interns, but in the same year the National Library of Medicine discontinued its program. Since only three traineeships have been available yearly at any one library, there have never been more than nine offered in any one year.

The lack of success in increasing the number of internship programs has been a matter of concern, not only to the Subcommittee on Internships, but also to many other members of the Association, some of whom have stated that it is unrealistic or unwise to include internships as a part of the standards program when so few opportunities for training are available. Now that money is available for training through the Medical Library Assistance Act, a greater number and a greater variety of internships may certainly be expected to develop.

Although minor changes were made in the Certification Code in 1956, no major revisions occurred until 1964 (11), when the Standards Committee presented recommendations which the membership at large voted to accept. Under the revised Code, a passing grade on an examination covering the materials usually included in an approved course in medical librarianship or an internship may be substituted for completion of a formal course. Prior to this change, interns who had not attended a course could not be certified at any level. Convinced that graduate work in

subject fields related to the life sciences or librarianship should be recognized, the Standards Committee revised Grade II to permit a master's degree in an appropriate subject field as an alternate to an internship. Since only two persons had ever received Special Certification, this provision of the Code was dropped; the credentials of persons holding foreign degrees or with unusual backgrounds are now evaluated in terms of Grade equivalencies.

By the end of the reporting year 1964/65, 671 persons had been certified: 309 with Charter Certification, 332 at Grade I, 26 at Grade II, 2 at Grade III, and 2 with Special Certification.

Not all of the early hopes for the Certification Program have been realized. It has served, however, to define the kind of education that medical librarians working in the field thought necessary, and it has stimulated the establishment of courses and internships to provide that education. Medical libraries are now faced with a world of new techniques and a shortage of personnel. Not only are more librarians needed, but librarians already in the field must learn new techniques, and the introduction of new techniques requires a growing number of nonlibrarian specialists, e.g. programmers and other machine experts. A variety of new educational programs is required to meet these needs.

One program which has been under discussion is the training of medical library technicians. Last year in a survey of institutions offering library courses at the subprofessional level, the Institute for Advancement of Medical Communication made the surprising discovery that twenty-four such programs were already in existence and two institutions planned to start programs in the fall of 1965 (12). Although none of these courses is designed for medical library technicians, members of the Medical Library Association have supported technician training. In a paper presented at the Second International Congress on Medical Librarianship, Gertrude Annan said:

Just as the training and accreditation of practical nurses have elevated standards of the registered nurses and freed them from routine duties, so could the training and accreditation of library technicians favorably affect programs of libraries (13).

A grant application recently was made to establish a course for medical library technicians at the Upstate Medical Center in Syracuse, New York. Interested librarians have suggested that

the Medical Library Association should set up standards for such courses, encourage their development, and provide certification to persons who complete the courses.

The recent passage of the Medical Library Assistance Act will provide the means for new educational programs which could not have been financed before. It remains for the Association to determine what and where these programs should be and to evaluate and revise its standards program as often as current needs require.

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