

Leading into the future: Library Operations at the National Library of Medicine

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In 2005, Donald A. B. Lindberg and Betsy L. Humphreys, AHIP, presented their vision of medical libraries in 2015 to the health professional community [1]. In 2006, the National Library of Medicine (NLM) completed a long-range plan to guide the library to 2016 [2]. It is now incumbent on the Library Operations Division of NLM to ensure that it is guided by that vision and helps to achieve the goals of the long-range plan. To this end, Library Operations has embarked on its own strategic planning process.

Library Operations is the heart of NLM's essential services to health care professionals and the general public. Products and services such as DOCLINE, PubMed, Medical Subject Headings (MeSH), MedlinePlus, and LocatorPlus are the backbone of medical library services and information management in the United States and abroad. While this editorial focuses on challenges and opportunities Library Operations faces, we do not work in a vacuum. All our services have benefited from synergy with other NLM components. The library's multidisciplinary workforce has been critical to NLM's previous successes and continues to be its greatest asset.

We are delighted by the magnitude of worldwide use of NLM products and services, but we will not go forward resting on our accomplishments. We would like to share with you our priorities for 2008 to 2010. While our plans include optimizing technology, evaluating our existing services, and nurturing younger talent, our immediate priorities have a decidedly practical bent, and the first three are more significant than others.

In real estate, the expression is "location, location, location." For NLM's Library Operations, it is "space, space, space." Space, or the lack thereof, affects nearly every decision we make. NLM's urgent

need for a third building is widely known, and its delay impacts all programs, but space for staff and collections will be problematic for years to come unless change comes swiftly.

NLM has an archival responsibility to retain older copies. This responsibility has become increasingly important as network libraries cancel their print subscriptions in favor of electronic access and remove older print runs to free up space for collaboration and other uses by faculty, staff, and students. Because we have not cancelled any print subscriptions to journals, without major renovation to enable the installation of additional compact shelving, we will outgrow space for our collections by 2010. We do have a plan in place to strengthen the floor in our second stack level so that compact shelving can be installed. This will provide shelving for several years of collection growth, but it will be expensive and disruptive to staff who have their work areas in the stacks. Some collection areas are already out of space. Although one might question why NLM continues to acquire print copies of journals when we have access to electronic versions of their content, a major reason is that the artifact—with its advertisements, news features, tables of content, and other non-article features—can be of great historical value.

A second essential priority for Library Operations is to preserve information in a usable form. This includes material born digital and those items that need to be preserved in digital form so they are much more accessible. In a series of decisions over the past two years, we have stopped microfilming as a preservation method and developed a policy for determining priorities for digitizing deteriorating or unique items in the collection. Working groups have created a management plan for our digitization efforts (complementary to

PubMed Central) and a process for evaluating and selecting software to be used for NLM's digital repository. Library Operations will lead these complementary digitization efforts, and our decisions, made in consultation with the National Network of Libraries of Medicine (NN/LM), may well impact the activities of other health sciences libraries.

Two other current efforts also relate to long-term preservation of the biomedical literature. A multi-year project is underway to inventory the entire NLM serials collection and replace missing issues and volumes, as was previously done for brittle materials as part of the preservation microfilming program. In addition, we are working with the National Institutes of Health Library to negotiate licenses with publishers that will enable NLM to provide services that are equal to or better than our services for print materials to on-site and remote users.

Third, as we develop new programs, we must continue to work with other NLM components to enhance existing information services and move them in new directions. Among these efforts will be a new search engine for the NLM website and MedlinePlus; the PubMed Discovery initiative [3], a multi-phased effort to provide more useful information and links on the PubMed page; products to support social networking and other new software waiting in the wings; linking of NLM products to personal health records and electronic health records; and improved support in locating valuable interactive material that is no longer merely supplemental to journal articles but increasingly has become an integral part of these articles.

NN/LM is a unique and fundamental NLM program. As former coordinators of this network, we consider it essential to developing and disseminating new and better programs and services through its

extensive outreach efforts. The network is the cornerstone of NLM's nationwide effort to reduce health disparities and reach those patients and their families who have limited access to information. One of our priorities is to encourage more innovation in the network, to allow it to be a test bed of new ideas. Some of our thoughts for the network are position sharing among regions, back-up services across regions, support for unique programs at the regional level, and expanded emphasis on goals that are national as well as regional. It is not too early to focus on new services for the next NN/LM contracts in 2011.

As NLM and network libraries devote energies to determining how to deal effectively with future man-made and natural disasters, Library Operations is defining its role in NLM's expanding emphasis on disaster information management. One aspect of this is developing a continuity of operations plan (COOP). It will result in our ability to maintain essential services during emergencies. Beyond Library Operations' COOP, the institutions that serve as Regional Medical Libraries are discussing regional back-up services and the role of network libraries in the aftermath of emergencies that have broad impact on our population. Also NLM, network library members, and medical publishers are developing a mechanism for free document delivery service in times of need. After Hurricane Katrina, medical school and hospital libraries demonstrated their spirit of cooperation and openness. Now, many publishers wish to work with network libraries to provide free access to needed electronic journal articles for extended periods of time after a disaster occurs. Finally, we envision using MedlinePlus and Go-Local programs at the state and local levels to provide public access to critical information needed for planning for and responding to emergencies and disasters. We intend to continue working with network libraries on a variety of disaster management-related issues.

In the years immediately ahead, expect to see even more NLM emphasis on standards and efficiency of operations. Health data standards, health information technology standards, and standards that will help us develop digital repositories are among the projects that will receive much more attention. This emphasis, along with a renewed concentration on using technology to operate more efficiently, will help areas such as our consumer databases, indexing, data creation, and cataloging. We need to explore new uses of technology to keep abreast of processing workloads in our production areas. It will not be long before staff and contractors will index in excess of one million articles each year!

The authors joined NLM, each more than thirty years ago, via the library's excellent Associate Fellowship Program. That program is but one of the many through which NLM supports training for librarians and information specialists. For five years, the library has funded, along with the Association of Academic Health Science Libraries (AAHSL), the highly successful NLM/AAHSL Leadership Fellows Program. With many graduates moving into director positions, the program is rapidly showing dividends for our investment. The American Library Association Spectrum Scholar initiative, designed to support diversity in the library profession, has benefited from funding and program support from NLM. Library Operations has a role in the library's semiannual bioinformatics training courses held at the Marine Biological Laboratory at Woods Hole. We are anxious to help librarians develop the diverse skills needed as we move into the era of genomics and electronic health records and the new roles that this era will bring.

Throughout NLM, the staff is our greatest resource. Just as we were nurtured by Joseph Leiter, NLM's first associate director for library operations, we feel a responsibility to nurture our younger staff and plan for succession at all levels. Our

goal is to promote more recruitment from outside NLM as well. We have many creative and resourceful staff but recognize the value of bringing different perspectives from hospital, academic, and public library settings. In Library Operations, we regularly make incremental improvements to many excellent services that have operated effectively for years. Sometimes, we must stop polishing the diamond! These excellent services will be supported as in the past, but we are shifting some of their talented staff to help with new priorities. Some involve reaching new audiences, others might support electronic health record initiatives, and still others involve major redesign of some successful products.

In a nutshell, those are some of our key plans for the near future of NLM's Library Operations. We are proud to be the successors to Joseph Leiter, Lois Ann Colaiani, AHIP, FMLA, and Betsy Humphreys and hope that we can build on the ideas and organization that they put in place in order to provide even better service to medical librarians and the public at large.

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