

Library Technicians: Need, Training, Potential

BY GERTRUDE L. ANNAN, *Librarian*
New York Academy of Medicine Library
New York, New York

ABSTRACT

The desperate shortage of librarians could be alleviated by training library technicians to work under the supervision of qualified librarians. 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 librarians. Courses have been given to assist untrained personnel supervising small libraries. However, our goals should be (1) to train technicians to perform nonprofessional library tasks; (2) to set standards for accreditation, ensuring a clear differentiation, one obvious to the librarian, the technician, and the administrator; (3) to advise administrators of the possibilities of developing small but effective libraries under a local system, using a trained librarian as supervisor and trained technicians in individual institutions; (4) to persuade doubting administrators of the worth of an efficient library. Action should come from authoritative bodies such as library schools and library organizations.

EIGHTEEN thousand librarians are needed to fill positions in this country, according to a recent estimate (1). Obviously our schools can educate only a small fraction of that number. What then can be done to help in this seemingly hopeless situation? The answer may well be the training of library technicians to perform clearly defined services under the supervision of qualified librarians.

Library literature abounds with studies made by management teams pointing out the extravagance in time and money of policies which permit highly paid personnel to perform subprofessional duties as part of their regular functions. Many tasks fall within this category, and the librarian can and should be freed from time-consuming and simple chores which interlibrary loans, acquisitions, and processing of material inevitably demand. In large libraries this division of labor has been profitably adopted, and subprofessional workers have been employed for many years. There is nothing novel about the use of library technicians. It is the discussion of training which leads to controversy, despite the fact that in cities where such training may be had, librarians appreciate the opportunity of engaging those who already understand simple library techniques. Much of the difficulty lies in the fact that today the most desperate need is for li-

brarians in small libraries, and the use of the technician in these libraries is more complex where no professional supervision is readily available. Different methods have been devised to solve this problem, with varying degrees of effectiveness, but progress has been particularly slow because of well-justified fears that the use of technicians might imperil our efforts toward maintaining standards. There is indeed a very real danger that administrators may attempt to economize by engaging technicians where librarians are needed. Any solution must take this into account, but solution there must be, and one which can meet all objections.

We might look to another field where a struggle of many years has now been crowned with such success that the long period of controversy and heated discussion is all but forgotten. In 1903 state registration of graduate nurses was first required by law. Dorothy Deming in 1946 wrote,

As graduate nurses have advanced to professional status, medical science has required of them wider knowledge, longer study and greater skill. . . . Practical nurses have been left to do the elementary routine, and repetitive . . . procedures for which the professional nurse no longer has time and, some would say, inclination. Almost at once it became evident that . . . the practical nurses must also be taught, trained, supervised, and licensed to practice (2).

It is interesting to note here that the Ballard School of the New York Young Women's Christian Association, which now gives courses in sub-professional library subjects, was the first to provide formal training for practical nursing in this country in 1897 (3). Yet licensing has been "a matter for long and violent debate among professional nurses since 1900" and was "still not backed wholeheartedly by some medical and hospital groups and some individual nurses" (3) as late as 1944-46, crucial years, for it was World War II and the desperate shortage of nurses that spurred the efforts of those advocating training and licensing of the practical nurse. Letters of protest appeared in the journals of the period. Yet by 1947 a Joint Committee reported that the national nursing organizations were "ready to assume full responsibility for leadership and guidance in setting standards . . . for the services of practical nurses" (4). In the same year the United States Office of Education published its *Practical Nursing—An Analysis of the Practical Nurse Occupation with Suggestions for the Organization of Training Programs*. In 1953 the National League for Nursing voted to include practical nurses in its membership, and a Department of Practical Nursing Programs was established under its Division of Nursing Education in 1957. By 1959/60 the number of state-approved training programs had mushroomed to 662, and it is anticipated that in the next decade the only entrance to practical nursing will be through schools of practical nursing.

A brief summary does little justice to the efforts which brought about

this important development, but it shows clearly the speed with which needs may be met when proper attention is focused upon them by influential bodies. Library associations and library schools might well consider the history of this movement, which has done much to improve standards in the nursing profession as well as to provide a large corps of auxiliary personnel. We hear today of the shortage of nurses. What would be the case if the role of the practical nurse had not been so determinedly set by official organizations? May we not learn from this story? Our problems are much the same. Many of our small libraries are managed by unqualified personnel, often anxious to learn and improve their performance. They are in every sense comparable to the practical nurse of twenty years ago. With proper training and supervision, with a well-defined area of duty, their contributions would do much toward easing the ever-growing shortage of librarians. It is true that we are not registered, cannot advocate state licensing, but it is in our power to endorse plans for training library practitioners to function efficiently in a role which would not endanger our own certification program. It might indeed be coordinated with it.

The increasing emphasis on specialized training for medical librarians has already had an impact on our certification code, and suggestions for changes have been proposed. New developments in library practice will surely bring their influence to bear, which may lead to further emphasis upon advanced graduate training for subject specialists skilled in languages, nomenclature, and the use of machines for storing and retrieving information. As we must be ready to accommodate our standards for the topmost part of our program to ever-changing patterns, so must we consider the tasks on other levels and be prepared to meet the future with well-conceived plans for training a large corps of workers to avoid a worsening of this critical shortage.

As this shortage is not limited to the United States, the solution to the problem may be of equal importance in other countries, especially in those new nations eager to build substantial collections. Here we are told that often those young people whose education qualifies them for study in our library schools are sorely needed to fill other roles. It may be necessary for some years to use those without college degrees who may seek training as library technicians. Such training would make it possible to have bright young men and women ready to perform the rudimentary tasks which would otherwise be relegated to clerks who have no understanding of the most elementary procedures. Dr. Dorothy Parker of the Rockefeller Foundation advises the establishment of local programs which will provide on-the-spot training in technical skills to help staff these libraries. She adds, "There is a crying need for the training of technicians."

There have been various efforts toward training technicians in the

United States. To many librarians it may come as a surprise to learn that there are a number of correspondence courses in librarianship. The National University Extension Association's *Guide to Correspondence Study* of January 1960 lists eight courses on book selection, eleven on cataloging, eleven on classification, one on government and pamphlet collections, and four entitled "Library Training." All of these are under the auspices of universities.

With the heavy concentration of libraries in New York, it is not to be wondered at that courses for training library assistants have been available there since 1949 at the Ballard School of the YWCA. The "library clerical courses" described in its current catalog are: basic library operations, elementary cataloging, elementary reference work, and subject filing and indexing. The first course is a "survey of clerical and technical procedures in libraries, including acquisition, binding, preparation, storage of library materials, circulation and routine techniques, etc. It includes consideration of related library forms, records, supplies and equipment. Lectures, demonstrations, field trips." There are twelve classes for each course, running one hour and fifty minutes each. Granted, twelve classes cannot offer detailed instruction, but what librarian would not be happy to engage a library clerk who has had the benefit of twelve classes taught by such a distinguished librarian as Mr. Robert E. Kingery, Chief of the Preparation Division, New York Public Library!

In the medical field the American Hospital Association has pioneered in offering institutes in librarianship which are directed to those without training who are already administering hospital libraries. The response has been overwhelming, and one medical librarian who participated as teacher and leader of a workshop course stated that of all her professional activities she has found this the most rewarding, because of the intense desire to learn on the part of those attending. These three-day institutes have been expanded to five days, with sessions devoted to the following subjects: selection and acquisition, resources (in people and materials), vertical files, cataloging and classification, circulation and interlibrary loans, care and treatment of materials, and reference. Of course, in such a brief period little more than an introduction can be provided. Yet a most useful service is presented, and one of some permanence, since kits are distributed which contain booklets, catalogs, and papers of practical value to the registrants. These institutes have been given in New York and Chicago and were available to those in hospitals in fairly large surrounding areas. The same type of institute has also been given by the Catholic Hospital Association in St. Louis and San Francisco, where, in a three-day institute entitled "Continuing Education Program for Hospital Librarians," the subjects discussed were: reference and bibliography, introduction to cata-

logging and classification, library administration (procedure and policy manual, financing and budget), and ethics and the library.

New York State also was the source of a most imaginative proposal, offered by Orange County Community College in 1957, a plan for a two-year curriculum for the library technician, combining courses in the liberal arts with some in subprofessional library tasks. A Committee to evaluate the program was appointed by the Deputy Commissioner of Education. After a three-year study, the Committee concluded that "there is no place for the proposed Library Technician Training program" (5). As an alternative the Committee recommended an in-service training program and suggested that the "Library Extension Division undertake training sessions throughout the State." Regrettably, this local solution has no implications for the national scene, and we can share in the disappointment of the President of the College, Mr. William G. Dwyer, that the Library Technology Program has been completely discontinued (6).

During the last two years courses have been given in Philadelphia under the auspices of the Graduate School of Library Science, Drexel Institute of Technology. This is surely a major development, which may hold much promise for the future. Dean John F. Harvey emphasizes that the term "library technician" is used deliberately, that the students are not recommended as professional librarians. The program is a nondegree program for persons who lack the formal qualifications for the master's program, but are "engaged in or intend to enter library employment at subprofessional levels." The four courses offered are: introduction to cataloging and classification, introduction to library services, basic reference sources, and selection of library materials. Students completing all four courses may be accepted in such other courses "as are suited to their needs." They receive grades and a statement of courses taken.

Sporadically, tentative probings have been made through trial courses in other places. The Boston Science and Technology Group of the Special Libraries Association provoked a small storm when an account of its course for beginning librarians was published in 1961 (7). Perhaps the fact that the students were called "beginning librarians" helped to stimulate the protests that this course would lower standards by discouraging professional training for librarians and encouraging administrators to fill library positions with those who have a smattering of elementary information. On the whole, however, the responses were of considerable value in pointing the way toward what may be done in the future. One writer proposed that the Association should "instigate some accreditation standards before this practice becomes widespread." Another congratulated the group for "recognizing a fact of life—that untrained people are holding library positions." Those words were written by a former President of

SLA, Elizabeth Ferguson, who added, "I am not in the least afraid of non-graduate or non-academic training. I believe that all educational efforts support and build respect for full professional training rather than undercut it." That this attitude was shared by others within that Association became evident when in September 1962 the San Francisco Bay Region Chapter sponsored a two-day "Workshop for Library Assistants" to help introduce basic library practices and usages to library assistants. The guest lecturers were prominent librarians from that area (8). Emphasis was on

why the operations are in effect rather than *how* they are performed . . . with lecture and demonstration periods, such as: 1) The library—how it is organized, and the place of the library assistant. 2) Acquisition of library materials—dealer selection, orders, interlibrary loans, periodical subscriptions, and claims. 3) Processing of library materials—cataloging and classification, the card catalog, filing, shelf-arrangement, etc. 4) Library services—reference, circulation, abstracting—and special services, such as public relations (9).

These all represent genuine attempts to alleviate a distressing situation, and are valiant pioneering efforts. They all are designed to help solve problems arising in different areas with somewhat differing solutions. They all are, however, very definitely stopgap measures, which offer palliative remedies but promise no permanent cure. Nor can we hope for a cure until a carefully planned program is approved and sponsored by library associations and library schools. Such approval is necessary if we wish to have an effective system of training library technicians, with stated qualifications, with courses of instruction in clearly defined techniques in the performance of subprofessional library tasks. Standards must be set which distinguish between the work at that level and the work of the librarian. This is not a formidable task, for we have learned enough of the proficiency of subprofessional staff members in large libraries and of the needs of those endeavoring to chart their courses in small libraries without training or expert advice. With sponsorship by both associations and schools, such a program would have substantial chance for success in filling a need which is certainly not peculiar to medical libraries. At a meeting at the Chemists' Club in New York in April 1962, the theme under discussion was "The Changing Aspects of Technical Library Services." Yet the most earnest debate centered about the question of the subprofessional worker, because of the plight of company libraries too small to attract trained librarians. Nor is the need peculiar to this country. Courses have been given to library assistants in England, Germany, and Sweden. In England the subject has had the attention of the Library Association. An announcement was made in May 1961 approving further discussion of "a Library Assistant's Certificate for members of library staffs who carry out non-professional duties and who do not aspire to do otherwise" (10). In

October of that year the Association met and decided to postpone consideration (11). Here again there were misgivings lest such a program lower hard-won standards. The Association has also published an enormously useful volume describing in detail the duties of the professional and the nonprofessional, which would provide a valuable guide in setting standards for the training and certification of library technicians (12).

Certification, already at least contemplated for library assistants in England, would enhance a training program here in the United States. It should answer many objections raised against training subprofessional workers, make proper distinction between professional and subprofessional positions, and help greatly in persuading administrators of the worth of engaging trained personnel, indeed of the worth of the library itself. This would be especially true in our efforts toward improving our hospital libraries, for it is all too obvious that accreditation of hospitals gives little if any importance to the libraries therein. Complaints have been many from hospital librarians that accreditation teams seldom visit the libraries, and the all-too-brief discussion period which followed the papers on "Library Standards" at the 1962 meeting of MLA gave ample proof that the situation would not soon change, that the accreditation authorities would continue asking only that the hospital have an adequate library, without further stipulation. Dr. Kenneth B. Babcock, Director, Joint Commission on Accreditation of Hospitals, said: "Show me a hospital with a well staffed, adequate medical library, used knowledgeably and intelligibly by the medical staff, and I will show you a hospital that gives good medical care" (13). Despite this word of appreciation of libraries, he went on to explain that hospitals vary so much that it is not possible to set library standards or specify the number of books and librarians a hospital should have, with the number based on the number of beds in the hospital. Size, of course, is merely one of the criteria, and if even this is not to be established, the need is obvious and imperative that library associations set standards and requirements which may reasonably be met, especially in regard to librarians or library technicians to staff these small but important libraries.

If such standards are set, however, there must be some possibility of implementing them, some hope of finding trained personnel on both levels to perform these necessary functions, by whatever method seems most effective for the particular locality. Several are even now in operation. In Brooklyn there is an informal arrangement in which the librarian of a society library, Wesley Draper, is paid by the hour for his consultant services to two small libraries. In New Orleans, William Postell, a medical school librarian, is retained on an annual basis by the State of Louisiana to supervise four hospital libraries. In addition he acts as consultant for a

private psychiatric hospital. The most forward-looking plan devised is that in Jacksonville, Florida. Here, Helen Feltovic has a full-time position with the title of Librarian-Coordinator. She has been employed by six hospital administrators since August 1961 "to coordinate their libraries and to perform professional functions for which the individual library attendants lacked qualifications or experience, or both" (14). This, surely, is a practical approach toward the problem, and it promises much for the future.

For such a system, how much easier it would be if technicians were available to man the small libraries under supervision! Ideally, in the future, a technician who had passed a course such as Drexel offers, who was accredited, might also attend workshops emphasizing medical aspects of library work—reference tools, classification, medical library resources. The supervising librarian could then have a staff already sufficiently acquainted with elementary procedures to require a minimum of supervision and training.

Our goals then should be: (1) to train technicians to perform nonprofessional library tasks; (2) to set standards for accreditation, insuring a clear differentiation, one that is obvious to the librarian, the technician, and the administrator; (3) to advise administrators of the possibilities of developing small but effective libraries under a local system, using a trained librarian as supervisor and trained technicians in the individual institutions; and (4) to persuade doubting administrators of the worth of an efficient library. This last is perhaps the most difficult, but successful performance in other communities can demonstrate this forcefully and effectively to the most reluctant.

We can learn from the experience of the nursing profession that action must come from the authoritative bodies, such as library schools and library organizations. We can paraphrase a statement from their literature so that it reads: "The difference between a librarian and a library technician is a difference in degree of responsibility for the function, not a difference in function" (15). We can at least work toward solving a critical situation instead of bemoaning it. There is no phase of library work where action is more desperately needed.

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This consists of three articles, which with others were called to my attention by Mrs. Lois Miller.