THE BIOMEDICAL INFORMATION SYSTEM: DEVELOPMENT AND SUPPORT

Since its first session in 1976, the Western Pacific Advisory Committee on Medical Research has emphasized the importance of collecting and disseminating information for the development, implementation and coordination of research programmes in support of health programme development and management. A regional biomedical information system programme has accordingly been formulated.

A work plan for the Western Pacific regional biomedical information programme, which takes into consideration resource constraints, but is based on the principle of resource sharing, was formulated and discussed by the Working Group of National Focal Points for the Regional Biomedical Information Programme, held in Manila in December 1981, and priority activities were identified.

The attached paper has been prepared in order to facilitate the task of the Regional Committee in expressing its views with regard to the development and implementation of the programme.
1. INTRODUCTION

There can be little doubt that an effective transfer of scientific and technological information would contribute significantly to achieving the goals of the developing nations. Most countries, however, have extremely limited capabilities and resources, whether human or financial, to devote to the production and acquisition of scientific and technical information. Rather than to generate new knowledge, what is needed is to make the existing knowledge and information, available at various places all over the world, accessible to decision-makers, researchers and educators. The means for the communication and transfer of such knowledge and information must be established.

Following the decentralization of research promotion and coordination functions from WHO Headquarters at Geneva to the regional offices, there has been a steadily increasing interest in the development of effective and efficient health literature services in the Western Pacific Region.

The Western Pacific Advisory Committee on Medical Research (WPACMR), at its first session in 1976, drew attention to the importance of collecting and disseminating research information as the basis of a regional research programme. The report of a working group of librarians, held in Manila in November 1978, was reviewed by WPACMR at its fourth session in 1979. Recognizing their increasing importance, particularly in the context of the goal of health for all by the year 2000, it was felt that various ad hoc biomedical information exchange activities should be brought together and a comprehensive biomedical information programme formulated. For that purpose, a feasibility study to establish a regional health literature network to support the exchange of biomedical information was undertaken by two consultants in August 1980 and a framework and strategy for the development of such a network were formulated.

At the thirty-first session of the WHO Regional Committee for the Western Pacific, in 1980, the Government of Australia offered to provide countries of the Western Pacific Region with Medical Literature Analysis and Retrieval System on Line (MEDLINE) searches and photocopies. It was considered desirable to implement this project through the regional health literature network.

2. PRESENT SITUATION

Because of inadequate facilities and mechanisms for the inter- and intranational dissemination of information, the technical information required to implement research and health programme development activities is not always easily available. There is also an insufficient number of trained personnel to develop and support national biomedical information networks. However, considerable resources do exist which could be mobilized in support of such networks.
It can be assumed that if precise and reliable scientific, technological and managerial information were to be accessible in the most conveniently usable form, at the right time and to the right person, wastage of resources due to unnecessary duplication of effort in the invention, discovery or development of techniques would be minimized.

3. OBJECTIVES OF THE REGIONAL BIOMEDICAL INFORMATION PROGRAMME

The objectives of the regional biomedical information programme are:

At regional level
- to promote the sharing of health literature resources between Member States of the Region;
- to facilitate the exchange, transfer and dissemination of the information contained in health literature between Member States of the Western Pacific Region and between the Western Pacific Region and other WHO regions.

At country level
- to strengthen and develop national capabilities with regard to biomedical and health literature resources and services, and to promote their use in the context of national health information networks;
- to improve access to national and regional biomedical and health-related literature.

4. APPROACHES

4.1 Organizational approaches

The regional health literature programme will be a major component of the regional biomedical information programme. One of its elements will be the regional health literature network, which will be formed by national focal points designated by Member States. These focal points may be national libraries or information centres, generally located within leading medical colleges, health institutes or research institutions. Staff located at each national focal point will function as agencies for the development and strengthening of the country's biomedical and health literature services. This will entail coordinating the activities for the collection and dissemination of information of the various libraries throughout the country and maintaining contact with the national focal points of other countries to form the regional health literature network.

A regional biomedical information centre will be established: to promote, plan, organize, coordinate and participate in network activities. The library of the WHO Regional Office for the Western Pacific could be integrated into this regional biomedical information centre.
4.2 Technical approaches

Approaches at the technical level will consist in the following:

- developing resource sharing through the regional health literature network and the proposed regional biomedical information centre;

- collaborating in the development of standard procedures for the exchange of relevant biomedical and health-related information between countries;

- introducing and monitoring services to provide access to international bibliographical systems and to document delivery mechanisms;

- promoting, through consultant services, fellowships, seminars and workshops, the development of health literature library services and library manpower training programmes;

- developing increased awareness on the part of health administrators of their information needs and of the useful role that organized libraries can play in satisfying those needs;

- investigating the desirability and feasibility of developing a regional medical and health-related literature index;

- encouraging Member States to develop plans for upgrading their national biomedical literature resources and services;

- mobilizing and administering financial resources for implementing bibliographical activities.

5. ACTIVITIES

As part of the biomedical information programme, and subject to resource constraints, the following activities are being undertaken:

5.1 Establishment of national focal points

Procedures and mechanisms are being evolved to strengthen collaboration and resource sharing among all the Member States of the Region. Both developed and developing Member States are designating focal points. Those in the developing countries will function as the operating agencies for the development and strengthening of their national biomedical and health literature services. The focal points will promote and coordinate biomedical information activities at national level and maintain liaison with centres in other countries. They may also function as depositories for all government publications on health-related subjects.

A working group of focal points for the regional biomedical information programme, held in December 1981, brought together users and providers of information. Recommendations were formulated for the development of a user-oriented information service in support of research workers, planners and managers, and health workers and trainers.
5.2 Government support to the programme

It is important that the governments of Member States wishing to collaborate, particularly with regard to the regional health literature network, should give their full support to the programme. The inclusion of an item on the agenda of the current session of the Regional Committee should aid Member States in deciding whether or not to participate in network activities.

5.3 Collaboration with Member States

Collaboration is extended to Member States on request in the further development of their health literature services. With support from UNDP, a biomedical information centre and a network of libraries and subcentres are being developed in China. Activities are being undertaken to train staff in modern library and information services operation and management; provide modern library equipment and materials; develop uniform operational procedures - cataloguing, indexing, inter-library loans and the collection of statistics; establish a union list of serials and a union catalogue of books; and explore possibilities for using computers to support library management and services as well as to facilitate access to the international health literature database.

5.4 Implementation of the Australia/WHO Memorandum of Understanding for the supply of MEDLARS Services

The offer of the Government of Australia was for an initial period of two years. The services to be provided each year, through WHO, are as follows:

- 800 MEDLARS retrospective searches per annum;
- 400 MEDLARS selective dissemination of information (SDI) searches per annum;
- 4000 photocopies per annum of items retrieved by searches.

It is estimated that these services will cost approximately US$105,820 for the biennium.

Implementation of activities under the Memorandum of Understanding commenced at the end of 1981.

Promotional materials are being prepared for distribution to Member States who have been requested to designate focal points for the collection of requests. MEDLARS search request forms are being finalized and other administrative details in relation to implementation of the offer are being worked out.

5.5 Coordination with other agencies

WHO will continue to coordinate its activities with other international and bilateral agencies such as the South East Asian Medical Information Centre and the Canadian International Development Research Centre through its Singapore office.
5.6 Resource mobilization

Adequate funds are needed to carry out the above-mentioned activities to develop the regional biomedical information programme. Action will be taken to mobilize resources, particularly for the financing of bibliographies and activities aimed at strengthening national biomedical information resources and staff training.