Abstract
This is the fourth in a series of articles exploring international trends in health science librarianship in four Southern European countries in the first decade of the 21st century. The invited authors are from Greece, Italy, Spain and Portugal. Future issues will track trends in Latin America and Central Europe.

Keywords: comparative study, Europe, Southern, librarianship, health science, library and information professionals, national strategies, regional strategies

International trends in health science librarianship: Part 4 – Four Southern European countries

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Setting the scene
Greek people had many reasons to celebrate at the turn of the century – markets hit sky high values, financial indexes were positive and the upcoming Olympic Games of 2004 triggered growth. Research and development followed similar trends with new infrastructures [institutions, universities and hospitals, as well as departments and consortia (including libraries)] established all over Greece. The global financial crisis, however, hit Greece hard in 2008, causing a deep and long recession, now in its fifth year, with economic forecasts predicting at least one more year of negative growth. Public spending has been cut sharply leading to shrinkage of the educational and health sectors. The trends described in this article cover these two different eras with Greek health libraries now facing structural and administrative problems.

Key trends

The years of prosperity (2000–2007): establishment of novel, major infrastructures

The Greek National Health Care System was reorganised in 2001, with the establishment of Regional Health Authorities under the administration of the Greek Ministry of Health and Welfare. It consists of 132 Hospitals, 37 of which house well-resourced medical libraries. The first core infrastructure information system, ‘IASYS’ (cure), was created in 2005. Its main function is managing patient appointments; medical libraries are excluded from its scope. The establishment of the Biomedical Research Foundation of the Academy of Athens (BRFAA) provided a stimulus to scientific health
efforts, promoting excellence in both basic and clinical research, aided by state-of-the-art research facilities and a modern electronic library. The Hellenic Academic Libraries Consortium (HEAL-Link) was founded in 2000 to bring together the libraries of 38 Universities (including the University of Cyprus), 14 research institutes, the Academy of Athens, the National Library of Greece, the Greek Parliament Library, the National Institute of Agricultural Research and the Greek Institute of Education. Administrative issues led to 34 general and three military hospital libraries being omitted from HEAL-Link because control by different ministries was not resolved. The National Documentation Centre was strengthened with the introduction of new technological tools and services, the goal being to connect as many public libraries as possible. As a consortium HEAL-Link, aided by other individual institutions, has significantly enriched their collections by subscribing to many high-impact international journals, most being electronic. Over a 7-year period, health libraries in Greece invested strongly in novel technologies, computers and informatics (e.g. web 2.0 services).

The years of austerity (2008–2012): decline of Greek health libraries

As the ‘IASYS’ system was unable to meet the complex needs of modern healthcare administration and management in 2011, the Greek Ministry of Health and Welfare launched a unified interface, the Greek National Health Information System (called ESY.net). This system manages the National Ambulance Immediate Care Service, the National Blood Bank, hospital financial transactions, patient personal records and insurance and medical libraries. The emerging financial crisis, however, led to a lack of proper information technology management causing major system failures, instabilities, as well as severe problems in drug administration and availability from pharmacies. Efforts are underway to introduce the current version of ICD-10 so as to reduce healthcare cost, improve the quality of patient care and increase the flexibility of the healthcare system. Although about 16 000 terms are already translated into Greek, only one-third of doctors are involved. The major barriers to the adoption of IT solutions are the increased cost of electronic equipment in Greece and a lack of financial support to employ the needed clinical information scientists. Most of our colleagues are still employed either in research, university or hospital facilities and struggle to maintain their library functions and services in the face of lost journal subscriptions, limited consumable resources and a lack of personnel. To do this, they rely on national network and personal contacts.

Many experienced librarians are unemployed. To cope with reduced budgets, the government has decided to merge different institutions located several miles apart from each other to reduce administrative cost. Since libraries in Greece are not independent departments but usually assigned to general administration, the proposed merger threatens their viability. Apart from funding cuts, Greek Health Libraries suffer from chronic administrative issues, specifically the lack of a National Library of Medicine and the fact that most health libraries in Greece are not independent departments with individual budgets and management, but are usually assigned to the general administration services.

Conclusions

Despite the hostile economic environment and the downgrading of administrative services, medical libraries in Greece have achieved a high research output relative to its population. Restricted funds have severely affected Greek medical libraries leading to unemployment and a slowing down of the adoption of information technology. The fact that a high level of health scientific research has been sustained during the last 5 years of recession is the direct result of the establishment of novel librarian-ship infrastructures during the previous 8 years of prosperity. Resolving chronic administrative problems could significantly improve the effectiveness and productivity of libraries.

References

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Trends in biomedical libraries of the National Health Service (NHS) in Italy
Maurella Della Seta, Gaetana Cognetti & Federica Napolitani

Health science librarianship in the first decade of the 21st century in Italy underwent rapid changes made possible by advances in technology. Three important trends are briefly described below.

Creation of information networks among biomedical libraries

In the year 2000, a group of health librarians and information specialists conducted the first census of libraries and documentation centres of the Italian National Health Service (NHS). The survey provided a general view of the information structures in Italy (about 250) and the professional qualifications of librarians. It demonstrated that within the Italian NHS the role of professional librarians was not properly recognised. In 2002, the group created a permanent association, Bibliotecari Documentalisti Sanità (BDS).

Over the last decade, the situation has improved with the growth of regional information and library networks inspired by the events in Lombardy. In 1994, a regional law led to the setting up of Servizio Bibliotecario Biomedico Lombardo (SBBL, Lombardy Region) which has provided MPs with important electronic resources such as the Cochrane Library.

December 2003 saw the establishment of a national network of research libraries, Bibliosan (www.bibliosan.it), funded and promoted by the Ministry of Health. Through the Bibliosan consortium, more than 50 Italian NHS research libraries co-operate to buy subscriptions to periodicals, databases and software. Bibliosan updates its collections in ACNP (Italian Union Catalogue of Serials, University of Bologna) and uses NILDE (Network Inter-Library Document Exchange) for document delivery. All these networks co-operate to facilitate access to resources at a sustainable cost and to increase exchanges of publications.

At the international level, there is active collaboration with the European Association of Health Information and Libraries, EAHIL, www.eahil.net. The Necobelac project (www.necobelac.eu), focusing on training activities, created a network to improve scientific writing and promote open access models.

Providing information to patients

The challenge of providing information to Italian patients and their families, especially in oncology, has led to some noteworthy initiatives such as Azalea, a database of oncology resources for patients, created in 2003 containing about 4000 records. Relaunched in 2009 as Cignoweb, a new version of the database will soon be available. Both projects were financially supported by the Ministry of Health through the network Alleanza Contro il Cancro (ACC, www.alleanzacontroilcancro.it) and implemented by cancer research libraries. Between 2006 and 2007, two other projects aimed to create a network of specialised libraries and information resources in oncology, with the help of two patients’ associations: SICOP (Sistema Informativo per la Comunicazione Oncologica ai Pazienti) and SIRIO (Servizio Individualizzato di Richiesta di Informazione in Oncologia). The SION network (Servizio Nazionale di Accoglienza e Informazione in Oncologia) has become an important national resource.

The National Guideline System (Sistema Nazionale Linee Guida, www.snlg-iss.it) is producing a number of guidelines for doctors as well as a different version for the general public. Information specialists and librarians play a key role in searching the literature for evidence to support their development.

Setting up institutional repositories, databases and associations

The editorial output of Italian NHS research institutes is disseminated (mainly for evaluation
purposes) to the Ministry of Health Research Workflow which manages all activities related to national biomedical research. Open access institutional repositories are rapidly developing: the Istituto Superiore di Sanità (ISS) OAI-PMH-compliant repository (DSpace ISS, http://dspace.iss.it/dspace/) holds the ISS production and aggregates scientific publications from NHS partner institutions (30 000 records). The ISS Documentation Service in 2001 launched the SIBIL database (http://www.iss.it/sibi/), which contains Italian works in Bioethics (7500 records, from 1995), and completed the official translation into Italian of the Medical Subject Headings (MESH), also included in the NLM Unified Medical Language System (UMLS) project. The SIBIL database was recently included in the European Portal Ethicsweb (www.ethicsweb.org).

There are two important associations of Italian professionals in the domain of health information: BDS (Bibliotecari Documentalisti Sanità, www.associazionebds.it/) and GIDIF (Gruppo Italiano Documentalisti dell’Industria Farmaceutica e degli Istituti di Ricerca Biomedica, http://www.gidif-rbm.org/).

References


Trends in Spain: the growth of regional health libraries
Veronica Juan-Quilis & Laura Munoz-Gonzalez

Spain is divided into seventeen Autonomous Communities, most of which have created a regional health library which covers all their territories. These integrate the libraries previously associated with hospitals and other health centres. The main purpose of these regional libraries is to centralise subscriptions and rationalise the contracting of electronic resources.

The Andalusian Public Health System Virtual Library, created in 2006, has achieved a cost reduction of subscriptions of more than 30%. Not only has the Andalusian initiative proved cost-effective, but also led to greater efficacy in developing new services for the whole system. In the case of Andalusia, these improvements benefit more than 8 million inhabitants and 100 000 Health Professionals. Services such as Document Supply, Institutional Repository and Research Activity Studies have also been implemented and are available to the whole community.

Not only are Regional Libraries (also known as Virtual Libraries) cost-effective, but also they are efficient in diversifying the services they offer to end-users, applying new technologies where appropriate. The introduction of regional libraries has resulted in remote access to resources, social networks, enhanced customer services and other improvements.

The challenge of undertaking knowledge management for a regional health library has had implications for librarians, giving rise to new roles and responsibilities, for instance, abilities and skills to negotiate and set-up services within existing budgets.

The difficult economic situation in Spain since 2010 has impacted on Library Managers who are faced with budget cuts. There have been a number of responses to these economic pressures:

- Tougher negotiations with suppliers in 2011 to obtain the most electronic resources with less money.
- Faced with staffing cuts, head librarians have been obliged to take on more tasks and to be more imaginative and efficient in order to maintain a quality service.
- A detailed study of the editor licence conditions which allows us to know the permitted and prohibited uses of the subscribed resources for medical, training and research activities.

At present, health librarians are taking additional steps to maintain and improve services:

- Further co-operation between regional libraries with the aim of acquiring more power in
dealing with suppliers and collaborating with certain services such as Interlibrary Loans. To this end, some libraries have reached an agreement to create a collective catalogue using lists of titles from all Spanish Health Libraries.

- Greater co-operation with other organisations, for example, Universities.
- The establishment of region-wide rules to support Open Access policies and oblige our researchers to deposit their works at Public Institutional Repositories.

The National Health System Virtual Library Viability Project carried out in 2009 gave all regional libraries the opportunity to review the situation of the National Health System as regards the resources and services available to Health Professionals. However, this project did not lead to the creation of a National Health System Virtual Library. Nonetheless, the library managers who worked on the project continue to collaborate and exchange experience with the aim of setting the basis for a national health subscription licence.

References


Trends and challenges in Portuguese health libraries in the first decade of 21st century
Silvia Lopes

Introduction

Portuguese health libraries faced a range of new challenges, at both academic and health service levels, during the past decade. To cope, libraries, in collaboration with the Portuguese Association of Health Documentation and Information (APDIS), developed various strategies to ensure users have immediate access to relevant information from current, high-quality information sources. Medical and health librarians became aware of the importance of their roles.

Health libraries: places and buildings

Portuguese health libraries have evolved from enclosed places to new and very pleasant spaces with easy access to shelves and documents. Web services and tools enable distance access to health information in a range of venues – teaching rooms, laboratories, clinics, medical offices and Cybercafés. Wireless access supports the use of laptops, mobile phones, iPhones, iPods, iPads and other tablets anywhere, anytime. Libraries and librarians have made an effort to exploit these technological developments by providing web tools, updating libraries websites and acquiring both printed and digital documents (specialised databases, journals and e-books). This decade has seen the merger of Portuguese Hospitals and Health Centre Units, and some universities that have reorganised with medicine, pharmacy and nursing schools merged into ‘Health Sciences’ groupings, allowing a better use of human, financial and information resources. The Health Sciences Library of Coimbra University is an example of this type of reorganisation.

‘(...) established in 2009 as a result of the merging of the medical and pharmacy libraries. The new building [is] in a central area between both faculties and also near to health institutions in and around the campus (...). Users stand now to gain from the union of the physical and virtual resources of both libraries as well as its new space.’

Quality management strategies

The need to use strategic and quality management techniques to monitor the quality of services is widely recognised. Quality management strategies have been deployed in Portuguese libraries since the beginning of the 21st century. In 2000, the theme of the 5th APDIS Meeting was ‘Health Libraries: towards quality’. Some libraries have applied one or other of the available quality improvement tools and methodologies. The library of the Faculty of Pharmacy of University of Lisbon, for example, uses the balanced scorecard as a way of monitoring how the organisation is performing with regard to excellence. The Faculty of Medicine of University of Lisbon has invested in applying the CAF Model (Common Assessment Framework) which allows organisations to audit key activities and results based on evidence.
Services to library customers

Health Libraries should create and develop mechanisms to support students and researchers, physicians and other healthcare professionals. Users should be looked at as customers seeking a service information — for whom all efforts should be made. The Portuguese B-on Consortium – Online Knowledge Library plays an important role in supporting this mission. It aims to ensure that the Portuguese academic and scientific community has access to a wide number of scientific publications and electronic services. It encourages the use and production of scientific content by the community and promotes co-operation between national academic, scientific and health institutions.

Another important and successful initiative worth noting is the RCAAP Project (Repositório Científico de Acesso Aberto de Portugal) based on Open Access Initiatives.

In Portugal, the development of Open Access has been mostly carried out by the universities (...). The first Portuguese Open Access initiatives were initiated by the University of Minho with the creation of RepositórioUM – its institutional repository which was publicly presented in November 2003. RCAAP Project offers various services as a Portal and a Portuguese–Brazilian Directory of Open Access Repositories and Journals. By June 2012, there were a total of 42 repositories integrated into the RCAAP Portal. The RCAAP Directory ‘intends to add the scientific information resources available on open access in Portugal and Brazil allowing them to have more visibility and prominence’.

Open access and the Bologna Process have extended the role played by university librarians in higher education. Greater needs for information skills by students and faculty mean that librarians are increasingly involved in education and training. In recent years, there have been several projects in which ‘Libraries and their professionals are increasingly taking a role in promoting the acquisition of information literacy skills [by students] with the development of training programmes based on appropriate methodologies [including the e-learning and blended-learning programmes]’.13

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