

International relations of the Lithuanian Library of Medicine

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In Lithuania, medical workers are provided with professional information by a network of medical libraries: the Lithuanian Library of Medicine with its 11 branch libraries, 90 hospital libraries, Vilnius University Library and Kaunas Medical Academy Library. Smaller holdings of medical literature are kept in other major libraries of the country.

The Lithuanian Library of Medicine was established in 1944. It is the largest depository of medical literature in the country and the main centre of information. Its holdings amount to 713 000 copies of all kinds of documents. The major part of the stock (56.4%) is material from the Soviet period. Books have been purchased from various publishing houses and include about 3.2% Lithuanian publications. Two per cent were obtained by exchange with other libraries.

The most valuable, even unique, reference publication produced by the Library is *Lithuanian Medical Literature*, the retrospective national medical bibliography from 1940 to 1983. Due to financial shortages its publication was stopped, but the information from the subsequent period is available in a typescript form.

The network of hospital libraries gets few resources for literature acquisition. The Lithuanian Library of Medicine assists them in every possible way: transferring duplicates and some donated literature to them.

We have a more favourable situation in our branch libraries, which are financed from the resources of the Lithuanian Library of Medicine. They serve about 50% of our library patrons. Branch libraries acquire and hold information sources which are not older than 5 years and contain publications in accordance with their host institution profile and patrons' needs.

For nearly 50 years, Soviet medical information sources dominated the literature available to Lithuanian physicians. Western literature did not exceed 33%, because currency restrictions prevented our subscribing to more than 40 Western periodical titles and buying more than 800 books a year. With such an imbalance in resources, the Library was not able to satisfy the needs of medical professionals. So in 1987 the library appealed to Lithuanian medical and donor organizations in USA and Canada for help. Lithuanian emigrants have retained their identity and cultural ties through a variety of cultural, professional and help organizations. For example, the Lithuanian Research and Study Centre collects, stores and studies all material which is related to the activities of the Lithuanian exodus; the World Lithuanian Medical Association unites medical professionals and the Lithuanian Mercy Lift is an aid organization. With their help, the first parcels of medical journals and books reached our library in 1989.

The new period in the life of the Library began in 1991 with the restoration of independence. Links with the East became weaker. An economic crisis developed and, in this situation, increasing assistance has come from the West.

This period also saw the start of library computerization. Our Lithuanian colleagues in the USA donated our first personal computer and the MEDLINE database on CD-ROM. The need for the latest medical information has been increasing rapidly. Modern and costly information technology is a necessary condition for the improvement of information delivery, but governmental funding has not been sufficient.

In 1993 the Soros Foundation started the East Europe Library Project, which provides medical databases on CD-ROM. Our Library's application was successful. Two computers with laser printers, 14 CD-ROM databases valued at \$26 000 and 5 days of training for a staff member were provided in Budapest. From 1994 the Soros Foundation has also covered the cost of 18 Western journal subscriptions.

In 1994–96, subscriptions for 23 periodicals published by the Scandinavian University Press and Blackwell Science were taken out on our behalf by the Norwegian Medical Association. The East and Central Europe Journal Donation Project, organized by the New School for Social Research in New York, has provided 23 titles, the American Heart Association—four titles, and the American International Union of Physiology and the Swedish Society of Paediatric Neurology—one title each.

The World Lithuanian Medical Association, led by their President, Dr A. Vanagunas, and the Lithuanian Research and Study Centre in Chicago, headed by Dr J. Rackauskas, undertook a project to create an Audio-visual Resource Centre. An additional grant was received from the Soros Foundation. Initially the Library was supplied with videotapes and the necessary hardware and software. In 1994, when the Library celebrated the 50th anniversary of its foundation, the Centre was opened for medical workers. Great personal help in acquiring audio-visual materials has been rendered by our Lithuanian countrywoman Mrs. D. Lukas at the US National Library of Medicine (NLM). A new teaching facility is now available in the Library—interactive video disks with a computer monitor and demonstration equipment were a personal gift from Mr Craig Locatis. Smaller audio-visual centres have been founded in five other libraries and there are plans to use such centres for public education.

The Library maintains close relations with the NLM. One of the most important projects, implemented by the NLM working together with the Lithuanian Mercy Lift, is on-line Internet connectivity. A fibre optic line, high speed communication equipment and servers have been installed, and other line upgrades were made to provide the Library with full Internet connectivity. A local area network was installed and the Library began using the World Wide Web for information access and NLM's DOCLINE for the automated processing of inter-library loans. Free Web access to MEDLINE and inter-library loan assistance has been provided for 2–3 years. These efforts put in place the basic backbone for the development of the health science information network in Lithuania. The support of our countryman Mr C. Locatis, the Project Officer at NLM, has been essential to its success.

In 1994, a library staff member completed 1 year of training at the NLM and returned to train other staff. The Director also went to the USA for 3 weeks of conferences and training. GRATEFULMED for information searches in 30 bibliographic and factual databases, which was created by the NLM, is now available to patrons in our Library and five other medical libraries in the country, via direct Internet connection.

Also in 1994, the Library was granted the status of a WHO Documentation Centre and depository. So we can now obtain basic WHO documents and periodicals free of charge. A 1-week workshop was organized for the national WHO Documentation Centre representatives. A few years ago, WHO and the United Nations Environment Programme initiated the Global Environmental Health Library Network (GELNET) project to improve the accessibility of scientific and technical information on environmental health. Its main objective is to make environmental health information widely known and used. The Lithuanian Library of Medicine has been a member of GELNET since 1995 and receives documents from other related international organizations.

We have recently entered into relations with other international library organizations. In the autumn of 1994, the President of EAHIL, Mrs Monique Cleland, paid a visit to our Library. Owing to her efforts, the Library became a member of EAHIL—the membership fee being paid by the Association. In 1995 we received vital assistance through the efforts of EAHIL and Mrs Elisabeth Husem, its president, when the Government decided to move our library from the centre of Vilnius to unsuitable premises in the suburbs (see the article by E. Husem in this issue pp. 21–27). Subsequently, the Government decision was revised.

Relations with the Nordic Library Association have the potential to develop into long-standing cooperation. In 1994 two librarians from our staff were enabled to take part in the 4th European Conference of Medical and Health Libraries, owing to funding from the Norwegian Library Association. In 1996 the EAHIL President, with a Norwegian library group, paid a visit to our Library. We discussed the essentials of cooperation between the medical libraries of the two countries. We were happy to learn that the Baltic Committee of the Norwegian Library Association had started a 1-year project to supply full-text documents according to our requests and needs. Some libraries in Norway will participate in a project 'donation of textbooks' for our Library.

This year, the Government has approved a programme for scientific library development and the financing of the Lithuanian Integrated Library System, which is far from being sufficient. Once again we are appealing to various foundations and nonprofit organizations. We have never been left alone with our problems. With international help we could do much to introduce and use modern information technology. International cooperation is a stimulus for our further efforts. It also changes positively the attitudes of the Government to the needs of libraries.