

Celebrating Partnerships in Health Information

As Partnerships in Health Information (Phi) celebrates 20 years of working with librarians in Sub-Saharan Africa, **Jean Shaw** explains how the work has developed over the years.



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PHI could not have chosen 20 years in which the pace of change has been so rapid. Indeed, it was because store and forward email facilities for Africa had become available that Phi was inaugurated in the UK in 1992. Julia Royall from the National Library of Medicine was invited to speak to a gathering of UK librarians, organised by Michael Carmel (then Regional Librarian for South West Thames), about the possibilities of email connection to Africa by satellite. We started from there, with two library partnerships being initiated. In Uganda, the Sir Albert Cook Medical Library at Makerere University was partnered with the Clinical Sciences Library at the University of Leicester; and in Khartoum, the Medical Library was partnered by the University of Wales College of Medicine (now Cardiff University).

Meeting information needs

Requests for journal articles or literature searches came by email, but at that time journal articles were available only on paper. So for Uganda, photocopies of requested articles were sent via the High Commission in London, and duplicate copies of journal runs (*BMJ* and *Lancet* for instance) were sent by carrier to Sudan. But this was a drop in the ocean – the sheer impossibility of meeting the needs of African health professionals by this means was glaringly obvious. Even before the Health InterNetwork Access to Research Initiative (Hinari) came to the rescue in 2002 by persuading medical publishers to provide free electronic versions of journals to low-income countries, Phi had already modified its strategy to include capacity-building visits to the UK for African librarians. There were also scoping visits by Phi to partner countries to assess the priorities for training and support, which at that time included books and equipment. Since the beginning of the 1990s, most African university libraries had been unable to subscribe to journals or buy new text books, and the concept of evidence-based health care, which was taking hold in the UK and other developed countries, was not any part of a health librarian's training.

Visiting time

The first visit of a librarian from Africa was from the Albert Cook Medical Library in 1998. Librarians in the South West Thames Region gave her a warm welcome. They later clubbed together to provide a

About Phi

Phi was founded in the UK in 1992 to promote the availability of health information for professional education and practice and for the general public by supporting partnerships between African and UK libraries. Phi works with the Association for Health Information and Libraries in Africa (Ahila) and its chapters in African countries.

Phi's main objective is capacity building, through workshops, and training visits for individual librarians and information professionals to the UK. Phi has been working with the Information Training Outreach Centre for Africa (Itoca) since 2008.

- www.partnershipsinhealthinformation.org.uk

fax machine (newish technology at the time) to make delivery of journal articles quicker. What interested our African visitors then was the process of library automation and its implementation.

The first visit to Africa by a Phi representative was to the Congress of the Association for Health Information and Libraries in Africa (Ahila) in 1996. This proved to be the start of improved contacts and trust between African librarians and representatives of Phi. Later, Steve Pritchard (from what was to become Cardiff University) visited Sierra Leone to assess the situation at the time when the country was at peace again, after the civil war. His report provided a very much better idea of the context and difficulties under which medical librarians worked and ways in which support might be given. Sierra Leone was in a terrible state at that time and a couple of consignments of books and equipment (from a library that was closing down) provided much needed up-to-date resources. Cardiff University has continued to support the College of Medicine and Allied Health Sciences Library in Sierra Leone on a generous scale by joint projects and the gift of an electricity generator to keep the computers and lights going when the central supply was off.

Expanding workload

So Phi expanded its workload, working with partners to obtain grants from the Department for International Development (DfID), the Elsevier Foundation and the Pilkington Family Trusts. Support by the Friends of Phi covered most of our basic running costs at that time as the work was done on a voluntary basis. But it was



A workshop for librarians in Tanzania.

clear that the four library partnerships with Kenya, Sierra Leone, Tanzania and Uganda were already outstripping Phi's ability to support them as effectively as we would have wished. Capacity building in the form of workshops provided by UK partners needed the knowledge that Phi had gained to support them. Visits by partner librarians to the UK required carefully planned programmes devised in conjunction with the UK partner. And continued expansion of Phi's network of development organizations, medical and health libraries was needed to ensure that all our visitors' expectations could be realised effectively.

Expansion

At the same time, Phi also needed to explore new avenues for expansion. Through the good offices of Simon Llewellyn (a professional fundraiser) we were generously supported by the Sir Halley Stewart Trust over a period of six years in order to appoint a part-time, salaried Programmes Officer. Emma Barton (Stanley) has been instrumental in achieving the Director's (Shane Godbolt) efforts to expand Phi's activities in building the network of organizations of relevant NGO's in the UK, and in expanding our contacts with African librarians through Ahila. This had to be achieved against an ever changing background: new training needs for librarians to meet the challenges of evidence based health care in an increasingly digitized world; and Phi's involvement with the IFLA's promotion of Public Access to Health Information.

This expansion into the realms of health information for the public was not entirely new to Phi. The Tanzania/Royal College of Obstetricians and Gynaecologists DfID-funded project included the introduction of a health information module into the curriculum of the School of Library, Archives and Documentation Studies in Tanzania, and working with the Tanzanian Library Association to introduce 'Health Corners' into public libraries. Phi's contacts in a number of African countries made it the ideal partner to pilot the material produced for IFLA in Kenya, followed by a whistle-stop tour by Paul Sturges and Shane

Godbolt to Uganda, Tanzania and Ethiopia. Since then this workshop has been run by Shane Godbolt in Senegal (French speaking) with Philippe Colomb, from the Pompidou Centre Library in Paris and in Mozambique (Portuguese speaking with help from the participants). It will be run again by Philippe Colomb with assistance from H el ene Gorrington (a Library Services Manager in Birmingham and the International Officer on the CILIP Health Libraries Group) at the Ahila Congress in Cape Verde, which took place in October this year.

Phi has always supported and worked with Ahila, which has organised biennial congresses shortly after its inception in 1984 in Nairobi. At the 2010 congress



Library for Clinical Officers (Diploma in Medicine), Kenya. The books in the office to the left the are more up-to-date material.

Glossary

Ahila – Association for Health Information and Libraries in Africa

Hinari – Health InterNetwork Access to Research Initiative

Itoca – Information Training and Outreach Centre for Africa

Phi – Partnerships in Health Information

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in Burkina Faso, a strategic plan for the Association was presented to and agreed by the membership. Support from Phi has resulted in a part-time paid secretariat based at the Information Training and Outreach Centre for Africa (Itoca) in South Africa. Such a coordinating post is much needed as the Executive Officers and Council members of Ahila are based in different countries throughout the continent.

Goals achieved

In some ways it may be said that Phi has achieved what it wanted to do – but in a way that was not perceived when it started. The information scene in Africa has come a long way since the days of sending paper photocopies. Through the internet, Hinari, open access initiatives, numerous websites and initiatives such as eGranary,¹ the difficulties of access to health information have largely passed to other international organisations. Similarly, training workshops run by Phi and UK partners in Africa are no longer such a vital part of partnership activities, since the required expertise is now often available in-country and they are able to run their own workshops. These can be augmented by the training services provided by Itoca from South Africa. Itoca's training resources range over many areas, from records management to digital repositories and are available on-line, offline and as face-to-face workshops. So by funding the part-time post of a Phi Coordinator within Itoca, Phi is able to work with a powerful training organisation to supply the training needs of health librarians, either individually or through their institution and organisations such as the country chapters of Ahila.

Information deficits in rural areas

So where should our attention be focused now? Phi and others may be able to see some progress in the capitals and major cities in sub-Saharan Africa, but the old problems have not been resolved. 'Black holes' of information deficit remain in the provinces and rural areas. Even in a large hospital in the provinces or in schools of nursing, there may be no library of any practical use and qualified librarians in such places are rare. Poor connectivity and power failures still hamper access to the internet, there is not enough material in local languages, and too little of the literature available is concerned with disease and disability in an African context. I could go on!

These are the problems that our African colleagues will need to address, working with other Africans to find innovative solutions that will suit their country's cultural and environmental conditions. It is a huge task for a relatively small number of information professionals to undertake and thus one that Phi and its partners will need to support increasingly by indirect action rather than directly. Our strategy is maturing to meet the current situation – Phi and its library partners are no longer the drivers and primary providers of training sessions. Phi and Itoca are positioning themselves to support Ahila initiatives and those of their country chapters.

Nevertheless, to continue to build capacity as the effects of digitisation race ahead is vital to achieving our immediate and long term aims. Carefully structured programmes for study visits to the UK tailored to an individual's needs will become a bigger part of the process as well as close cooperation with Itoca and other global partners and libraries through personal contact, as well as our website² and blog.³

Throughout its history, Phi has had to adapt its activities as conditions have changed, from its small begin-

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Opening ceremony. 13th Ahila congress. Nasra Gathoni (President) second from left, is seated next to the Cape Verde Minister of Health.



Public Access to Health Information workshops – in three languages (Portuguese, French and English) organised by Phi and Ahila at the 13th Ahila Congress, Cape Verde, October 2012.

Celebration: 15 November

There will be a celebration 20 years of action to improve health in Africa by facilitating access to reliable health information on 15 November at the Royal College of Obstetricians and Gynaecologists, Nuffield Hall, 27 Sussex Place, Regents Park, London NW1 4RG. Contact Trevor Mitchell if you are interested in attending: 020 8866 2644; trevorfmitchell@btinternet.com

nings in 1992, through the promotion of evidence-based health care workshops – and now into the challenges of the digital age. During this period, African librarians and information professionals have progressed; such changes have necessarily been reflected in Phi's strategy as the information agenda moves from its original base (Phi in the UK) to librarians in Africa through Ahila and its country chapters.

We have certainly lived through exciting times and our thanks must go to all of those individuals and organisations who have supported us both financially and in kind, but especially to the Friends of Phi⁴ who remain our financial bedrock. [1]

References

- 1 <http://bit.ly/dpckZR>
- 2 <http://bit.ly/AyrA6g>
- 3 <http://bit.ly/PG8JoS>
- 4 <http://bit.ly/S81m8h>