

PDWAH 035

EVALUATION OF THE PRITECH INFORMATION CENTER

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During the first 15 months of its existence, the PRITECH Information Center has undertaken numerous activities which cannot be characterized as cohesive: the Information Center appears to be in search of an identity and a role. This is not to say that 15 months have been wasted. Quite to the contrary, the activities carried out should, for the most part, form a strong basis for the future operations of the Center provided that some clarity, definitions and distinctions are introduced at this time. If this is not done the Information Center runs the risk of meandering down a variety of paths, none of which merge into a coherent direction.

The basic objective of any information center is to provide information to a particular user group. The operations of an information center, all of which are predicated by its user group, can be broadly categorized as: acquisitions, technical processing and dissemination. These operational categories constitute the framework of this report. Review of and recommendations for these operations are followed by a concluding section on management issues.

I. ACQUISITIONS

The subject focus of the approximately 1400 items acquired to date has been heavily concentrated on ORT and, to a lesser degree, immunization, a reflection of overall PRITECH orientation.

The initial collection was built by the Information Manager through visits to the major relevant collections in the U.S. and Europe where she selected and photocopied key documents. The on-going acquisitions process includes subscriptions to several journals considered most crucial to the collection as well as appropriate newsletters. Current information resources are identified through a subscription to the ASCA search service of the Institute for Scientific Information and regular MEDLARS searching provided gratis by Johns Hopkins University. In the case of the ISI-ASCA service, the weekly print-out of titles undergoes preliminary review by the Information Manager; it is then sent to the Head of the PRITECH ORT Task Force for final decision on material to be acquired. Physical copies of the final selections are obtained primarily by photocopying at the National Library of Medicine or through inter-library loan requests. Photocopies of materials selected from the MEDLARS searches are obtained gratis from Johns Hopkins University.

The initial acquisitions operation has been carried out in a most efficient manner. Issues concerning future acquisitions which should be addressed include:

-A clear definition of the subject focus of the collection. While the current emphasis on ORT material is a reflection of overall PRITECH orientation, future plans for PRITECH activities should be transmitted to the Information Manager so that materials can be acquired to support these activities. While it is not within the mandate of the Information Center to build a huge, definitive collection, it should be noted that any significant surge of activity beyond ORT would require additional acquisition funds if the collection of ORT material is to be maintained at its current level.

-Continuing review of materials produced by, or available from organizations visited during the initial collection building stage. This can basically be accomplished by regular review of bibliographies or newsletters produced by these organizations. This effort should bring not only current material but also some non-English language items into the collection. (Discussion of the proposed "inventory" listing of documentation from these organizations is taken up in the dissemination section of this report.) One significant organization that was not covered in the initial acquisition effort is PRICORP which the Information Manager has indicated will be contacted in the immediate future.

-Technical level of materials acquired.

This refers to core materials acquired for the Information Center's collection as opposed to materials acquired for bulk distribution. The latter is primarily a dissemination issue while the former constitutes the basis of the Center's ability to respond to information requests. A mix of materials ranging from the most basic to the highly technical should be included in the core collection. One or two copies of any bulk distribution material (including AV materials) should be included in the core collection so that they will be processed and appear in the Center's holdings list.

-Materials produced outside of the U.S.

Particular reference is made here to materials produced in the Third World. While these materials cannot be obtained through traditional methods, an effort should be made to obtain copies of documents acquired by PRITECH consultants and staff during field activities. This is not to say that such persons should actively seek out documents for the Information Center during their field work. It is simply a matter of making available (at least for photocopying) materials brought back from the field that might otherwise remain exclusively in personal files or libraries. Conference documents provide a good example of this type of material.

Anne Tinker's descriptive letter on the Information Center sent out to AID Missions included a request that any relevant documentation be sent to the PRITECH Information Center. This request

1) Contact S. P. S

2) Consult with Prog. office

should be regularly repeated in correspondence with AID Missions although one would be ill-advised to expect it to produce a significant influx of material.

When specific PRITECH activities are linked to Third World institutions, e.g., INCAP and ORANA, the information exchange with these institutions should provide additional materials produced outside of North America and Europe

II. TECHNICAL PROCESSING

For the PRITECH Information Center this operation covers cataloging and indexing of materials forming the core collection and computer entry of the bibliographic data. This operation was severely hampered by what may be considered an excessive amount of discussion on the tools to be used to carry out the cataloging and indexing and the delayed purchase and installation of the computer system.

As far as the cataloging and indexing tools, it would serve no useful purpose to attempt to reconstruct the tortured history of controversy surrounding them. Suffice it to say, decisions on which tools would be used for cataloging and indexing the collection should have been reached at a much earlier point than this. It should also be noted that these decisions can only be left in the hands of information professionals and do not fall within the area of expertise of administrative or technical staff of the project.

At this point, all discussion on these tools should definitively cease. The product of the past 15 months' discussion should be considered a determination to use the UNESCO Thesaurus (with expanded sections on diarrheal disease, immunization, training and health education) in conjunction with a controlled vocabulary listing culled from other relevant thesauri. This controlled vocabulary is complete and needs only to be entered into the computer, sorted and printed. No effort should be made at this time to refine this terms listing with extensive "use for", "related term", "broader term" or scope notes. In short, print it as is and put it to use.

It at some point in the future the PRITECH Information Center should be required - for purposes beyond its own operations - to produce a definitive thesaurus of terms on primary health care technologies, that would be a task best carried out through a consultancy with an information professional experienced in thesaurus construction.

The much delayed purchase and installation of the computer system to be used by the Information Center also hampered technical processing operations. The primary problem this delay presented was the impossibility of finalizing the cataloging/indexing format without the system on which the data base would run being in place. Now that the IBM,XT is installed and the Condor software has been tailored to handle the Information Center's technical processing system, the bibliographic data input format should be finalized immediately so that data entry can proceed and the requirement of producing an Information Center holdings list can be met.

The input format appears to be adequate in its present form with one notable exception: the artificial distinction which has been introduced by having separate "subject" and "key word" fields. This distinction should be eliminated and only one field used for listing terms assigned to an entry. This artificial distinction points to a traditional approach to cataloging and indexing that requires comment. A call number traditionally represented the "primary" subject of material processed and determined its physical location. It retains importance if the primary method of accessing a collection is through "browsing" of materials on shelves. This should not be the case in the PRITECH Information Center. The computer capability available to the Center eliminates any need for extensive concern over primary and secondary subject terms. Because the computer system allows for rapid search of materials using a variety of subject terms, the significance of the call number is considerably reduced. It can continue to be used for physical filing purposes but the assignment of the call number should not entail excessive time - consuming effort. In a computer environment, it is no more or less significant than the other subject terms assigned.

true!

An additional comment on the cataloging and indexing approach concerns the level of specificity of subject terms assigned to materials. Given the limited subject universe of the PRITECH collection, an effort should be made to assign narrow, precise terms rather than broad terms. This high precision approach is the only route that will insure subject distinctions are made within the collection and will ultimately result in more effective data base searching and retrieval.

*It's not that
it's just
this way*

The Information Center is now at a point where it must use the tools at its disposal to process the documents it has acquired. To date, approximately 500 documents have been cataloged/indexed; there is a backlog of approximately 900 unprocessed documents. A two-pronged approach is required to handle the 500 documents which have been processed but require revision (since they were done before the finalization of the cataloging/indexing tools and input format) and the 900 unprocessed documents.

For the revision of the 500 processed documents, the following workplan is proposed:

-Revision of cataloging/indexing using the controlled vocabulary list should be carried out by the Information Manager and the Information Assistant. Because of the monotonous nature of this task, best results would be achieved by setting a goal of 20 revisions per day per person. If the 40 revisions per day schedule is maintained this task will be completed in 12.5 working days/ 2.5 weeks.

-The revisions as well as other bibliographic data will need to be transcribed to new input format sheets which accurately reflect the format which appears on the computer screen. Unfortunately this step is necessary to begin the data entry process. The Information Assistant would be condemned to remaining hopelessly behind in all her tasks if she were required to enter the entire 500 item backlog, transposing field entries for each and every item. The transcription from the old format to new input sheets should be done by the Information Center's part-time assistant. If a schedule of 40 sheets per day can be maintained this task will be accomplished

in 12.5 working days. Given the three day per week work schedule of the part-time assistant, the task will be spread out over 4 week

-If revision and transcribing schedules are maintained, at the end of 3 weeks 360 transcribed input sheets should be ready for computer entry. At this point the services of a temporary typist should be employed to enter the data. (A temp agency should be contacted at least a week beforehand and specifications should include not only IBM experience but also bibliographic entry experience if available.) Assuming the data entry will require approximately 5 days, the temporary assistance should be scheduled for the final week of this one month operation, with the 360 transcribed sheets ready for entry at the beginning of the week and the remaining 140 sheets transcribed during that week and ready for entry by the final day of the temp's assignment.

During the final week the Information Manager and Information Assistant should do a daily proofreading of the entries done by the temp so that they can be immediately corrected.

The result of this proposed one month operation would be a 500 item data base, the print-out of which should be submitted to AID as the (now long overdue) holdings list, an annual requirement of the project contract.

The schedule of the operation does not assume full-time attention by the Information Manager or assistants. It does require a commitment of a block of time from each working day to meet the proposed schedule. Since the Information Manager and Information Assistant should complete the revisions in 2.5 weeks, it is recommended that they then transfer the block of time committed to the revisions to processing the 900 item backlog. Since the bibliographic data for these materials will be entered on the final version of the input format sheet, no more time need be allocated from the part-time assistant for transcription. When the part-time assistant has completed her transcription task (at the end of 4 weeks) her time should be returned to preliminary cataloging of the backlog.

If the Information Manager, Information Assistant and part time assistant all contribute to processing the backlog, a quota of 50 documents cataloged/indexed and entered into the data base per week could be realized. At this rate the backlog would be cleared in approximately 4 months. However, given the planned May/June absence of the Information Manager (whose position is budgeted at 10 months during the second year of the project), the backlog cannot be cleared in 4 consecutive months. Serious consideration should be given to hiring temporary cataloging/indexing assistance during the Information Manager's absence.

At this point in the project, concentration on cataloging/indexing and computer entry is essential. Without such concentrated effort the unprocessed backlog will become a permanent feature of the Information Center. It is anticipated that approximately 50 documents per month will be added to the collection. If the current backlog is not cleared quickly the monthly 50 will not be added to the collection, only to the backlog where they are inaccessible except through inefficient, time-consuming manual searching. Further, the data base and holdings list will be of reduced value as they will only partially reflect materials actually in the Center.

III. DISSEMINATION

The Information Center's dissemination activities have, to date, consisted of : "mini-library" mailings, ORT Task Force mailings, providing briefing material to PRITECH consultants responding to information requests, and PRITECH descriptive literature distribution.

The "mini-libraries", consisting of approximately a dozen basic documents, have been distributed to all AID Missions and appropriate AID officers in Washington. AID has now requested that this basic set of documents be distributed to a specified list of PVOs which will be submitting proposals for the "child survival" funds.

The ORT Task Force mailings have numbered six to date and consist of photocopies of technical articles selected by the Head of the Task Force (from the ISI-ASCA service and MEDLARS searches). This distribution has grown beyond the Task Force itself to approximately 30 recipients, all of whom are based in the U.S.

The briefing materials provided to PRITECH consultants basically are drawn from "country boxes" which have been photocopied as needed from the WASH project information center.

Information requests have numbered 60 to date. These include both document requests and reference queries.

PRITECH descriptive literature has been provided to AID Missions and distributed at appropriate conferences.

There are a number of issues concerning the Center's dissemination activities which should be considered. First to be dealt with will be those concerning activities carried out to date:

- The "mini-library" mailings should cease when the current stock is depleted. The individual documents can be listed as items available on request from the Information Center (or from the document issuing agency) in future PRITECH promotional literature. This recommendation is being made because the primary target group for the "mini-libraries", AID Missions, has been covered. Any blanket distribution of this set of materials beyond the AID Missions falls outside of the mandate of the Information Center.
 - The ORT Task Force mailings presently serve an extremely limited group. The material gathered for these mailings should be brought to the attention of a much wider audience, AID Health Officers in particular. The Task Force mailings should be transformed into a "Technical Literature Update" communication: a brief (maximum one page), frequent list of titles of the material selected by the Head of the ORT Task Force which can be requested from the PRITECH Information Center. This list should be sent to AID Mission and Washington Health Officers as well as persons on the current ORT Task Force mailing list.
- Providing a short list of documents which can be requested rather than the documents themselves may change the nature of the

copyright problem involved in bulk distribution of photocopied materials. (The Information Manager has indicated she is reviewing the technicalities and requirements of copyright brought up by the ORT Task Force mailings.)

written to council

remember this setup [A comment must be added here on utilizing the computer capabilities available to the Information Center to support this proposed "Technical Literature Update". The mailing list itself most certainly should be computerized and labels generated accordingly. The titles listed in the Update should be entered into a master list maintained on the computer. The block of titles for an individual Update can be copied to the Update standard letter form (also maintained on the computer). Ideally, titles for Updates could be drawn from the Information Center's data base. However, given the backlog in technical processing, it would be unwise to cripple a potentially effective system for alerting users to new technical material by linking it to the technical processing operation. (It is assumed that all materials listed in "Technical Literature Updates" would eventually be cataloged/indexed and entered into the data base.)

1 -The "country box" briefing material provided to PRITECH consultants appears to be of limited value. This assessment is based on a random examination of these country files. Consideration should be given to tailoring briefing materials to the specific assignment being undertaken by a consultant. This implies advance notice from the PRITECH technical or administrative officer to the Information Center on the nature of the consultant's task so that enough time is available to locate appropriate material.

-Information requests which have been received by the Center are currently kept in a chronological file. In the future, replies which are of a substantive nature should be copied and placed in the appropriate subject and/or country files as they may form the basis of response to future queries.

-The PRITECH descriptive literature which presently consists of a folder of materials, should be basically replaced with the descriptive brochure which has been near completion for a

considerable time now but has not yet been finalized. Distribution of the folder should be limited to conferences and seminars in the future. Both the brochure and folder should be reviewed and updated annually to accurately reflect PRITECH activities.

The above recommendations for the PRITECH Information Center dissemination activities are limited in that they correspond to current activities. In order to more broadly consider potential future activities, discussion of the Center's dissemination operations (which are broadly defined here as providing information services) will now be expanded to cover the issues of: user groups, products and methods.

User groups: The Information Center's user groups are made up of AID Washington/Mission Health Officers and PRITECH staff and consultants. A much more serious effort should be made to reach the AID user group, particularly through frequent, brief communications on the Information Center's services and materials. It should be noted that there is a distinction being made here between mass distribution of materials to AID and an information alert effort which would bring attention to the existence of relevant materials and their availability either through PRITECH or the issuing agency. There should be some bulk distribution of certain materials to AID (the most obvious examples being the ANNUAL TECHNICAL UPDATE and key health education/communications material, particularly audio-visuals). However, any indiscriminate blanketing operation, particularly of technical literature, could not be justified even with the most expanded budget. The emphasis on frequency and brevity for this proposed alert service is being made in order to maximize its potential usefulness. The proposed "Technical Literature Update" should be the basis for the alert service.

With regard to the PRITECH project user group (staff and consultants) there has not been any clear effort to date to integrate the information services of the Center into discrete PRITECH activities. The Information Center should be supporting PRITECH activities far beyond the level of generality it has to date. This can only be accomplished by close coordination and

communication with project technical officers. Information services can be tailored to discrete project activities only if the Information Center is made aware of those activities and viewed and used by the technical staff as a support mechanism.

While the most serious attention must be paid to strengthening information services to the Center's current user groups, some consideration can be given to a limited expansion of the user groups. The most logical candidates to be included are selected PVOs active in areas relevant to PRITECH and obviously those carrying out AID-funded projects. Ministry of Health staff -in countries where PRITECH is active - present another potential user group. Generally stated, any expansion of the user groups should be linked to discrete AID and PRITECH activities. A distinction must be made between user groups, which are provided information support services, and target audiences for health education and communications activities which attempt to promote concepts. The user groups and target audiences may in some cases intersect but this will not be a universal occurrence. Efforts to expand the user groups should be mindful of the finite nature of the PRITECH project and therefore the Information Center: it is a project with specific goals to be accomplished in a specific time-frame. The Information Center's services cannot be conceived as open-ended as they would be in a permanent institutional setting. This is the basis for the argument that services should be linked to discrete project activities.

Products and Methods: The Information Center's primary product is (or will be) its holdings list generated from the data base. Beyond the holdings list, an "inventory" listing documentation in other relevant information centers (e.g., AHRTAG, ICDDR B) has been proposed by the Information Manager. Serious questions must be raised as to the feasibility of compiling such an inventory and the usefulness of such a product. It would in effect be a lengthy bibliography of potential interest to researchers but not necessarily to practitioners. As far as the logistics of compiling

such an inventory, they would pose very severe problems unless all centers were using the same technical processing methodology and compatible computer equipment. This is not the case nor will it be.

It is strongly recommended that the inventory proposal be abandoned. A modified version of the inventory concept would be retained however: it is assumed that key relevant materials from these organizations are being acquired for the Center's core collection and therefore will appear in the Center's holdings list.

The goal of information networking implicit in the inventory proposal would much better be met by the compilation of a resource guide: a listing of institutions, persons and information centers relevant to primary health care technologies (with an obvious emphasis on ORT and immunization). The Information Manager's trip reports are a logical starting point for the compilation of the guide. The mailing lists of selected organizations (e.g., AHRTAG/DIARRHOEA DIALOGUE) should be used to identify institutions and people to be included in the guide, particularly those in the Third World. An insert in DIARRHOEA DIALOGUE might also be used to request descriptive information on relevant activities.

Beyond the Information Center's holdings list, a resource guide is the most logical, feasible and probably most useful product the Center can produce.

Other information products in which the Center is involved, though not responsible for their production, include the ANNUAL TECHNICAL UPDATE and health education/communications materials. Serious consideration should be given to translation of these materials into French and Spanish. If a "technical report series" is undertaken, those materials should also be translated. Such a report series would logically require the input and support of the Information Center but overall responsibility for its production should rest in the same hands as the ANNUAL TECHNICAL UPDATE.

Rather than get into the onerous business of issuing a newsletter, PRITECH overall and the Information Center in particular, should utilize existing publications as vehicles for disseminating information. Discussions with AHRTAG or producing a regular insert for DIARRHOEA DIALOGUE should move beyond the talking stage to actually planning the substance and logistics of producing such an insert. A decision should also be reached on utilizing PATH as a dissemination vehicle.

What has been referred to in PRITECH internal documents as "decentralization" presents further possibilities for information dissemination. The planned INCAP and ORANA projects incorporate dissemination activities. What has not been clarified is the specific role the PRITECH Information Center will play in these projects. The most appropriate role for the Information Center would be to assist these institutions in obtaining relevant materials, particularly in appropriate languages. If requested, a translation of technical vocabulary used in indexing might also be done. However, the Information Center should not attempt to transfer its total technical processing system to these institutions. The basis of this recommendation is that these institutions operate in an information environment that may not be immediately obvious to PRITECH and one that may go beyond the limited subject scope of PRITECH activities.

ORANA presents an excellent case in point. Even though the information component of the ORANA project is conceived as being in the health education/communications area rather than the establishment of an information center, the following comments should provide a cautionary note for future endeavors.

ORANA's information/documentation center is an active participant in the Sahelian Scientific and Technical Information Network - RESADOC. Its documentalist has been trained in the RESADOC methodology; the center has contributed a rather significant number of input sheets to the RESADOC data base; it was one of the first centers to participate in the REASADOC regional microfilming project. (This information is taken from:

RESADOC-PST INFORMATION, v. 3, n.1 and n.2-3, 1984, published by the Sahel Institute, Bamako). Furthermore, a substantial amount of AID funding has gone into the RESADOC project. It would be ludicrous to use more AID money to interfere with a technical processing system that is functioning quite adequately. Most fortunately, this is not the route intended for the ORANA project.

Generally speaking, future PRITECH Information Center activities in this area should concentrate on strengthening existing centers through acquisition of appropriate materials and possibly translation of technical vocabulary. The PRITECH Information Center should not be in the business of setting up new information/documentation centers nor transferring its technical processing methodology. In the event that a particular project requires the establishment of a new information/documentation center, a thorough examination of the information environment in which it will be operating should be undertaken before the center is established. A strong argument may also be made that establishing a new information/documentation center would be a task best carried out through a consultancy with an area specialist information professional, obviously working in conjunction with the PRITECH Information Center.

As a final comment on information dissemination activities, it should be kept in mind that no one method or product will be appropriate for all users. Different methods are appropriate for different products (e.g., an alert service for technical literature; bulk distribution of certain health education materials, such as posters). Information services obviously imply a plurality. Dissemination products and methods should be reviewed at regular intervals for effectiveness and modified accordingly.

The only reason an information center exists is to provide information to its users. This simple and obvious fact is often lost in the tangle of logistics involved in executing that task. Any proposed future PRITECH Information Center activities need to be put to the basic question: how will it benefit the user groups of the Center?

IV. MANAGEMENT ISSUES

The Information Center's organizational position within PRITECH is currently under the project Administrative Director. Moving the Center under the project Technical Director might solve the problem of the lack of integration of the Center into PRITECH technical activities - but it would create other problems by restricting the Center to technical activities. The Information Center is a support unit for the entire PRITECH project and as such should remain under the Administrative Director. However, as noted earlier in this report, much closer coordination and communication between the Information Center and the Technical Director should be taking place. This is as much the responsibility of the Technical Director as it is the Information Manager.

As far as lines of authority and accountability, the Information Manager should be supervising the operations of the Information Center. The Information Manager is in turn accountable to the PRITECH Project Director and the AED Project Officer. The AED accountability link is important in this case because of that organization's obvious strength in the information sector - the sector for which AED is responsible within the PRITECH project. Further, because the Information Manager's position is phased down to six months per year after the second year of the project, the AED Project Officer should be in a position to provide continuity in future decisions concerning the Information Center's operations.

With regard to the staffing of the Information Center, serious consideration should be given to adding temporary staff to clear the technical processing backlog. Also, part-time assistance at a clerk level is needed for mailings and photocopying as these are obviously not tasks that should be carried out at the level of the Information Manager and Information Assistant positions.

A quarterly review of Information Center operations should be undertaken to identify and check problems before they grow to the level of seriousness which the technical processing backlog has.

Since it is anticipated that additional funds (the amount not yet determined) will be made available to the Information Center, it is recommended that they be applied in the following order of priority:

- ✓(1) concentrated assistance to clear the technical processing backlog (cataloging/indexing and computer entry) so that Information Center users will have a functioning data base at their disposal;
- ✓(2) compilation, publication and distribution of the proposed resource guide;
- ✓(3) identification and acquisition of appropriate materials for ORANA and INCAP projects;
- ✓(4) translation of the ANNUAL TECHNICAL UPDATE and technical vocabulary;
- ✓(5) translation of the "technical report series" (providing of course that a decision is made to produce such a series).

The PRITECH Information Center has not drifted disastrously off course from its most general objectives. However, unless certain deficiencies are corrected (most notably technical processing) and unless decisions on dissemination products and methods are made and acted upon, the Center may very well become characterized by potential rather than kinetic energy.

The final general recommendation of this report is that the specific recommendations proposed herein be accepted and acted upon, or, in the event they are rejected, that alternatives be proposed in the immediate future.

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