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### **Memories of the Library 1961-1983**

I am delighted to be afforded the opportunity to contribute to the landmark centenary celebrations of the Library of the University of Colombo. I have been associated with the institution for over a quarter-century, first as a student, then on the staff of the Library.

When I graduated and on the lookout for a job, one of the high-profile jobs one could hope for was an academic post in the university. It was quite by chance that I got to know that the post of Assistant Librarian was an academic post on par with that of a lecturer. It also had the very attractive condition of employment of being sent abroad to the USA or UK for post-graduate studies within two years. So my career as a librarian was more accidental than by design.

I joined the Library in 1961 and was put in charge of the medical faculty library, which is an integral part of the Library of the University of Colombo. The Medical Library was located in the medical faculty building, which was far removed from the Main Library, which was on the move looking for a permanent building. When I took up the position, my only experience in librarianship, was the frequent use of the zoology department library which was confined to a room stacked with books in charge of a part-time assistant, who would make sure that any book taken from the library was back in the collection. I had to learn the basics of library science on the job on my own until I went to London to do the postgraduate diploma course in library science at the University of London.

I recall with nostalgia the stimulating academic year at the School of Librarianship located at the University College London reading for the Academic Postgraduate Diploma in Librarianship. It was an exhilarating experience learning and interacting with students from many countries. The course was one of the few postgraduate courses in library science offered by a university in the United Kingdom at that time. It was a two-year programme, part 1 by examination and part 2 by thesis. Part 1 satisfied the requirement by the university for confirmation of the job. Completion of part one also fulfilled the requirement to obtain the Associate membership of the Library Association, UK (ALA). Sometime later, the diploma certificate was given on the completion of part 1 and an MSc was awarded on the submission of a thesis.

I served the library for 22 years, most of that period at the medical faculty library. My period as Librarian was very short as I resigned to take up a position with the World Health Organization where I continued my career in librarianship. As Deputy Librarian, I was closely associated with the administration of the University Library and was in charge of the library during the Librarian's absence. My recollections in this article will relate to the period 1961 to 1983.

In the early sixties, while libraries in the developing countries faced many problems, such as the rising cost of books and periodicals and the reluctance of the authorities to increase the allocations for libraries, and the lack of organized education programmes for librarianship and other issues, there were significant advances in library development during that period. The transformation of librarianship from a pre-computer age to the computer era was in progress. The impact of advances in information technology development was changing the concept of a library from being that of a place for the collection of books and other forms of literature, to that of a location where access to information from all over the world was the key. It was witnessing a changing role of the librarian.

This was a time when librarians and administrators were debating issues relating to the libraries in developing countries at international forums such as UNESCO, WHO, and IFLA. Schemes for interlibrary cooperation were being set to meet the challenges. Union catalogues and interlibrary loans were among the avenues being looked into. UNESCO had set a scheme for the international exchange of duplicate literature, for which WHO took over the responsibility for medical literature. This scheme was beneficial to the developing countries, and Sri Lanka made use of it to obtain missing issues of journals to complete holdings of medical periodicals. The project also provided for the exchange of periodicals. Our library used the Ceylon Medical Journal to obtain medical periodicals from other countries.

The Medical Library, which consisted of a central library and many departmental collections, the periodicals were sent directly to the departments. Due to this procedure, multiple copies of journals were being ordered. Steps were taken to order only one copy of journals and all journals to be kept at the central library. This was a very unpopular decision with the professors and lecturers, who now had to visit the library to consult the periodicals. When the users were asked to sign an attached slip to indicate usage, it was found that some periodicals were never consulted. Due to these measures, it was possible to reduce the number of medical periodical subscriptions.

Education for librarianship was one of the issues that were being discussed. Due to the lack of programmes for library education, qualified librarians managed very few libraries. University libraries were among the best-equipped libraries in the country. They were in charge of professionally qualified librarians and hence the libraries were well organized providing many facilities and services, which other libraries did not offer.

Library education was introduced in Sri Lanka in the early 1960s when the Sri Lanka Library Association started part-time courses. Later, in addition to the expanded education programme of the professional body, the University of Kelaniya set up a Department of Library Science for graduate and postgraduate studies. It is with great satisfaction that I remember my tenure as a visiting lecturer for the postgraduate

diploma course. Later, I recollect that I initiated a diploma course in library science for non-graduates in the Faculty of Science. The programme had been successfully implemented after I left the University.

Since I was in charge of the Medical Faculty library, and the library was considered the premier medical library in the country, I was fortunate to have had the opportunity of participating in the international medical library conferences that took place at regular intervals. I recollect that at the Third Congress of Medical Librarianship in Amsterdam in 1969, which I had the privilege of attending, focused on regional and national systems around the world, and WHO was asked to play a leading role in the development of medical libraries, just as its counterpart, UNESCO, had done for school and public libraries. Since then the WHO has made a significant contribution to the development of medical libraries in developing countries.

I would like to record the contribution and support given by the WHO as I was associated with the project in Sri Lanka, and later with the programme worldwide.

WHO's Constitution specifically entrusts the Organization with the task of providing information in the field of health and to assist in developing an informed public opinion among all peoples on matters of health. In accordance with this mandate, WHO had taken various initiatives, which included the supply of medical textbooks and literature, the initiation of the WHO Revolving Fund for the purchase of books and journals, and the establishment of WHO depository libraries in the Member States.

WHO's role in the development of medical libraries was further enhanced, when in 1978, the WHO Global Advisory Committee on Medical Research set up a sub-committee on information. The Nobel Laureate Dr. Suni Bergstrom, who was then the chairman of the advisory committee as well, chaired the sub-committee. The mandate of this subcommittee was to direct the strengthening of medical libraries in the member states, particularly in SEARO, EMRO, AFRO, and South America. I had the privilege of serving on this committee representing SEARO.

A significant outcome of the mandate was the establishment of the Health Literature Libraries and Information Services network (HELLIS). The decision to set up the network was made at an inter-country meeting that was held in New Delhi in 1979, which was attended by the member states of the region including Sri Lanka. It is a consortium of Health Libraries in the South-East Asian Region which was set up to fulfill a long-felt need for providing easy access to health information to those engaged in the health sector. It is a cooperative resource-sharing network of health science libraries and it consists of two networks, the national network with a focal point, and the regional network consisting of the national focal point libraries with WHO SEARO as the regional focal point to coordinate the system.

After this meeting, Sri Lanka set up a national network with the Medical Faculty, the University of Colombo designated as the National Focal Point. The development of the Medical Library from this point was associated with HELLIS, which was developed into a regional network of national networks in the SEA region linked through the SEARO library.

I was appointed Librarian in 1980. The planning of a building for the Library was discussed during that time. I recollect the many meetings and discussions the staff had with the architects, engineers, and the administration in drawing up the plans and working out the costs of the project. The plan was completed but did not take off the ground due to funding constraints.

I was looking forward to a long tenure as Librarian in a new library building, but it was not to be, I resigned three years later to accept a position with the World Health Organization in Geneva.

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