

Forty years of *Arbeitsgemeinschaft für Medizinisches Bibliothekswesen*: Founding and Beginnings

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Opening speech

Ladies and gentlemen,

dear colleagues,

When I look around, I see many people who probably cannot imagine a life before the internet. I can assure you that such a life existed, and it was often just as interesting, turbulent and exhausting as it is today. However, a motto like the one of today's conference, "Everything, simple, immediately", would have been unimaginable even in a dream at that time; it was rather a nightmare that we achieved little more than the opposite back then, despite all our efforts. Allow me to take you back for a few minutes to that time, the time when our working group was founded.

I began my speech on the occasion of the twenty-fifth anniversary of the *Arbeitsgemeinschaft für Medizinisches Bibliothekswesen* with a quotation from the speech of Prince Bernhard of the Netherlands at the opening of the Third International Congress on Medical Librarianship in Amsterdam in 1969, in which he stated that, as concerned knowledge and information, librarians, in the public perception, had arrived in the present by then. I had chosen this quote not only because it said something about the mood of that time of change, but also because that congress had often been described as the nucleus of our working group - by myself as well as others.

But even germ cells do not come out of nowhere. In the course of time, knowledge of circumstances and conditions dwindles, and that is why I would like to take you even a little further into the past.

At the beginning of the 1960s, there was a sense of crisis in the documentation and information sector, especially in the rapidly growing and literature-intensive field of medicine, and many experts felt that there was a threat of collapse. A committee of the Senate of the USA presented a dramatic appeal to the plenum, pointing out that there was an ever increasing time delay before medical scientists could obtain information on the latest research result, a delay estimated at that time at two to five years. Even the supposedly most important bibliography, the Quarterly Cumulative Index Medicus, the committee stated, appeared with a delay of two years and all attempts at acceleration and automation had failed by then.

What the experts had not succeeded in back then was achieved later on as a result of political pressure. The reformation of information technology, after some further setbacks, experienced a major breakthrough in 1964, when the first computerized searchable version of Index Medicus was produced.

Experts in Germany were alarmed, too. Worried about catching up with the accelerated development, the German federal government founded a medical information and documentation institute, which, as far as I know, by the way, was later given its catchy name DIMDI by a librarian. The German Research Foundation (DFG), responsible for the corresponding literature supply, worked out recommendations for the foundation of the Central Library of Medicine, later to become the German National Library of Medicine, which were passed in 1967. Previously, fear of the expected high costs had apparently delayed this step. In 1969, the recommendations led to the agreement between the DFG and the state of North Rhine-Westphalia to establish the Central Library of Medicine by expanding the medical collection at the Medical Department of the University and City Library of Cologne, which had already existed since 1949.

At the same time, the DFG attempted to encourage the subject liaison librarians at German universities to cooperate with each other, considering, among other things, the problems of new universities or those in the process of being founded. The main focus was on problems of classification systems and subject indexing. A first meeting took place at the invitation of the DFG in December 1966 in Frankfurt, where the proposal for the establishment of a permanent working group was already made. At a further meeting in Bremen, the recommendation was made that the classification system of the National Medical Library of the USA should be generally applied. A permanent working group was still not established.

This was the situation when the Third International Congress on Medical Librarianship was held in Amsterdam in May 1970. Among the German librarians who attended the congress were Robert Schorer, who, as head of the Medical Department of the University and City Library of Cologne and designated head of the Central Library of Medicine, which was in the process of being founded, spoke about his library and the planned expansion of its tasks, Richard Polacsek, head of the new Ulm University Library, and H. Fink of Bayer AG Leverkusen, head of the Documentation and Statistics Department. Among other things, he spoke, very characteristic of the time, about the fact that, for cost reasons alone, computer searches could not fully replace manual searching. He also mentioned difficulties in queuing up for urgent inquiries when using the common mainframe computers. G. Böggemeyer from the University Library of Münster spoke about experiences with decimal classification in the field of medicine, a topic that would also accompany the later working group for quite a while.

On the margins of the congress in Amsterdam, the participating colleagues agreed that a permanent association of librarians at medical libraries was now urgently necessary and timely, and they were able to convince Mr. Schorer to invite them to prepare the launch of a working group. It was apparently not so much the impression of the congress itself that provided the impetus for this initiative, as the congress received little resonance and was not repeated until eleven years later, when the next congress took place in Belgrade. What seemed to be decisive, rather, was the conviction that the new Central Library of Medicine could finally be the nucleus from which to develop the working group.

Mr. Schorer then invited to a first meeting in November 1969 - which did not take place because of his sudden death on September 9, 1969. I myself had only very superficial knowledge of these developments then. At that time I was head of the user department of the UStB Cologne, I had just successfully concluded appointment negotiations with the senate of one of the new universities. At that moment, Professor Krieg, then Director of the UStB Cologne, in agreement with the Ministry of Education of North Rhine-Westphalia and the German Research Foundation, offered me the future management of the Central Library of Medicine, which was to begin operations on 1 January 1970 after having been included in the state budget. After a short hesitation I decided to take on these two attractive tasks. One of my first official acts was to invite interested colleagues to a meeting on 9

January 1970. I had quickly come to the conclusion that a permanent discussion forum would also be in the interest of the now extended library. The meeting took place in Cologne on 3 February 1970. On the agenda were the presentation of DIMDI, which had also been founded recently, and the indexing of medical dissertations, but above all the planned merger. As a result, the foundation of a working group was recommended rather than an "association" with the obligation to pay contributions, which was felt to be more stringent and against which the overwhelming majority spoke out clearly. A statutory commission was set up and the working group was officially established as the "*Arbeitsgemeinschaft für Medizinisches Bibliothekswesen (AGMB)*" on 17.11.1970, also in Cologne. The working group opened up the possibility of free membership for persons and institutions, in order to enable as many interested parties as possible from the heterogeneous circle of librarians, documentalists at universities, hospitals, pharmaceutical companies, documentation centres and other institutions to participate. There was no longer any question of restricting the work to the subject liaison librarians of university libraries. The fact that the working group was also open to colleagues from neighbouring German-speaking countries was not least due to the cooperation of Hans Wagner, an Austrian citizen and subject liaison librarian at the University of Bremen. In Bremen, he was supposed to build up the library of a medical faculty that was to be founded but never came about. Later on, when he had become director of the library of the Federal Ministry of Social Administration and the Federal Ministry of Health and Environmental Protection in Vienna, Hans Wagner still remained associated with the AGMB.

The framework of the statutes which were adopted in 1970 is still essentially preserved in their current version. That the legal form of the working group would have to change as soon as it had money and assets at its disposal was already clear to many at that time. These circumstances, however, did not occur until much later. Nevertheless, a certain dispute about more or less "associative life" continued to smoulder during the first years.

The board of directors elected at the first meeting was composed of myself as first chairman, the aforementioned Mr. Wagner, Bremen, and Mr. Helal, then at the University Library of Bochum, later director of the University Library of Essen.

At this meeting I also presented first thoughts on adopting the classification and subject indexing rules of the National Library of Medicine of the USA at the Central Library of Medicine. This idea met with strong reservations on the part of several participants, who spoke out in favour of the general use of RAK, which was then under development. These reservations were understandable enough for librarians who were integrated into larger systems. When I expressed similar thoughts again a little later, before the conversion of the indexing systems to EDP, Günther Pflug, Director General of the Deutsche Bibliothek, with whom I was on friendly terms, asked me not to put the barely established RAK at risk. Recently, after more than thirty years, I read a note in which he talks about an approximation of the RAK to the Anglo-American Cataloging Rules ...

In autumn 1972, the Library Committee of the German Research Foundation approved the "Recommendations for the Expansion of the Central Library of Medicine in the years 1972 to 1975". On the first page of this document it says: "The development goals formulated in 1967 have been achieved in almost all essential points in the past three years, and the library today occupies a firm place in the overall structure of scientific librarianship in the Federal Republic of Germany as a central reserve for special medical literature. It is also thanks to the Central Library of Medicine's initiative that a working group for medical librarianship has been founded, which "promotes cooperation between libraries with medical collections in a variety of ways". With this statement, the committee, which was the most influential in German academic librarianship at the time, conferred a title of nobility, so to speak, on our working group. That the "initiative" mentioned had much deeper roots, though, you have inferred from my words.

Dear colleagues,

I have taken you on a journey into the prehistoric era of librarianship before the triumphant advance of the internet with its immense possibilities. You will hardly have the opportunity to hear another contemporary witness from your founding days on the occasion of another anniversary. As a historian, I know that contemporary witnesses are often viewed with suspicion because of their necessary subjectivity. Please regard my statements as an attempt to capture the atmosphere of the founding days and to give some contour to the events of that time so that they do not disappear completely in the mist of the past.

I congratulate the *Arbeitsgemeinschaft für Medizinisches Bibliothekswesen* on the rich programme of this year's "Anniversary Conference", which I regard as proof of the working group's liveliness and vitality. I wish the AGMB that, in lectures and discussions, it will continue to deal with the ever new problems, and I close with the old wish

vivat - crescat - floreat,

may it live, grow and prosper.

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