Abstract

Poor availability of health information to health-care providers, academics, researchers and policy makers is common in the developing world. Papua New Guinea (PNG) is no exception with only a few adequately resourced health libraries and limited access to relevant health information. There are also limited academic institutions in the country and the information they provide is often basic and outdated. Many factors contribute to the lack of such important information facilities and services, not the least lack of sustainable funding and infrastructure.

While the developed world is moving ahead with technological advances in information and communications systems, the uptake in PNG is considerably slower. The PNG Institute of Medical Research (IMR) library is one of the few libraries in the country to date that has embraced these changes successfully. The success of this library is due largely to well trained staff, adequate infrastructure and funding and good access to the internet. This has enabled the IMR library to benefit through collaboration with GRATISNET (Australian Medical Library Network), and HINARI, the WHO Health Inter Network Access to Research Initiative. The PNG IMR library is highly valued within PNG, not only by IMR research staff, but also by health professionals, students, academics, individuals from both government and non-government organisations, and overseas colleagues. Notwithstanding the successes of the PNG IMR library, the delivery of health information in PNG as a whole is, at best, a work in progress. It requires support from all stakeholders, adequate funding, reliable communication systems and access to staff training.

Medical Libraries and Information Service in Papua New Guinea

Papua New Guinea is the largest developing country in the Pacific with approximately 6 million people who speak more than 800 different languages. Around 67.4% of the population are subsistence farmers and live in scattered rural areas where communication and transportation networks are often very difficult and expensive. The country has a literacy rate of 57.3% and an employment rate of 10.4%. According to WHO’s 2000 report, health status is the lowest in the Pacific region with an average life expectancy of 53 years. Overall health services in both the urban and rural areas are falling despite receiving high shares of government funds. Support services, such as libraries and information facilities are a neglected area in most public health facilities. Many academic institutions offering health related courses continue to lack access to essential textbooks and information resources to effectively cater for the teaching and learning needs of staff and students. On the whole, the non-availability of appropriate, relevant and up to date healthcare information in the country can be attributed to several key factors.
In the absence of a national medical library, the University of Papua New Guinea’s Medical Faculty library and the PNG Institute of Medical Research library are currently the country’s default medical libraries. The University’s Medical Faculty Library supports the teaching and learning needs of the faculty with great difficulty, as prices of books and journals increase yearly and funding is not adequate to meet the rising costs. Hospital libraries are basically non-existent, except for a few that have out dated books that are often tucked away in boxes or standing neglected on shelves in storerooms. Some hospitals in the country have small library collections with very basic reference books for doctors and medical staff.

The provision and availability of health information resources in PNG leaves a lot to be desired. Medical library and information services on the whole, lack priority and support by appropriate authorities and decision makers. Important stakeholders, including governing authorities, policy and decision makers need to provide the appropriate support necessary to improve the status of medical literature access. The Library Council of Papua New Guinea established in 1975 and the National Library and Archives Board are responsible to develop information policies, control and co-ordinate library and information services in the country. These bodies have not effectively functioned due to many constraining factors, the major one being the non-allocation of finance for operational and maintenance costs.

Inappropriate and inadequate funding for library and information services throughout the country is a clear indication of lack of priority. Academic institutions offering health related subjects do not get sufficient funding to cater for their information needs. With limited funding librarians in academic libraries are forced into restricting borrowing. Students cannot afford standard textbooks and as a result libraries purchase a few copies and place them on special reserve making it harder for students to access. Most academic libraries have ceased subscribing to medical journals due to the rise in cost of print journals over the years and inadequate funding. Medical textbooks in these institutions are outdated and over used with no means of replacing them.

Similarly, hospitals and healthcare providers do not have access to quality health information, let alone library and information facilities to cater for their information needs. Healthcare providers in PNG need basic information to diagnose, administer and prevent illnesses. Lack of access to information disadvantages healthcare provision in the country because decision makers and healthcare practitioners cannot make informed decisions about the healthcare services they provide. Through a random questionnaire conducted among health professionals, almost all of those interviewed admitted that health administrators do not allocate sufficient funding for library and information services. Doctors mentioned that they feel deprived of the right to having access to appropriate and timely information. When confronted with medical questions, they consult senior doctors for advice. Also, in the absence of information, continuing professional development is difficult as it is mostly dependent on continuing access to relevant and reliable information. Furthermore, healthcare providers and information professionals are not aware of ‘evidence-based’ healthcare and the vast health information resources available on the internet today.

Furthermore, the low professional status of librarians in the country, compounded by lack of necessary knowledge and skills affects their performance. Hospitals and
clinical libraries are less attractive in terms of pay and conditions, resulting in lack of interest by qualified librarians. With the disappearing custodial roles of librarians and the inevitable presence of computers and electronic resources, librarians in a developing country like PNG have a lot of catching up to do. Librarians need to be equipped with the appropriate knowledge and skills to realise their full potential. The University of PNG is the only public institution in PNG offering diploma and degree courses in Library and Information Sciences. The need for specialised training in medical information services and the use of different electronic resources and databases is a necessity if medical librarians are to adequately fulfil their roles.

Papua New Guinea does not have a properly functioning professional body. This weakness has greatly contributed to the deteriorating state of library affairs in the country. The PNG Library Association (PNGLA) later known as PNG Library and Information Association (PNGLIA) was established in the early 1980s and effectively lasted for less than a decade. From then onwards, the association no longer functioned as a professional association especially after expatriate librarians left and partly due to lack of proper infrastructure and sustainability programs. The country does not have a National Medical Librarian’s Association. Few medical librarians are members of international medical library associations such as the American Medical Library Association (MLA).

Advances

Developments are currently underway to improve internet access to major academic and research institutions within PNG. They will soon have faster and efficient internet connectivity through the efforts of Papua New Guinea Academic and Research Network (PNGARNet). PNGARNet, is an initiative of University Vices Chancellors, aimed at facilitating efficient and cost-effective delivery of internet services to institutions of higher education and research in PNG. A development aimed at significantly reducing the cost, while improving the quality, of education. Librarians, health professionals, students and academics will benefit immensely from this opportunity by accessing medical databases and free electronic resources such as HINARI and other electronic medical resources.

The World Health Organisation (WHO) initiative to bridge the ‘health information’ divide between developed and developing countries has been notably beneficial to PNG. In its efforts to fulfil the United Nations Millennium Action Plan – Health, WHO introduced HINARI, a collaborated effort between WHO and international publishers, to provide free access to medical journals to countries like PNG. There are 71 HINARI registered institutions in the country with the potential to providing access to thousands of users within their institutions. Sadly, not all registered institutions are actively using these resources, mostly due to slow, expensive and unreliable internet connections. Another initiative is the Blue Trunk Library (BTL) which is based on providing appropriate and up-to-date medical information to less developed countries. So far, 15 units of the BTL were distributed by Western Pacific Regional Office (WHO/WPRO) to various health institutions in Papua New Guinea which have proven to be very useful.
Papua New Guinea Institute of Medical Research Library

Quite contrary to the gloomy national scenario of medical library and information services in PNG, the PNG Institute of Medical Research Library is a fully automated medium sized modern library adequately equipped to meet the information needs of its internal and external users. With the manpower support of 3 Para–professional librarians and one graduate librarian, adequate library funding and good internet connectivity, we are able to cater for the much needed information needs of our users.

From its early beginnings in 1970, the PNG IMR Library evolved from a small collection of books and journals especially on malaria, to what is now a modern library. In 2004, the institute’s donor funded (Ausaid) modern library was inaugurated and is currently one of busiest medical libraries in the country. The library collection is extensive in its scope covering not only subject areas of the research carried out at the Institute but also supporting subject areas such as: religion, history, anthropology, philology etc. The library is fully automated and holds a total collection of over 15,000 publications. Its current total journal subscription of 36 print and online journals is further complimented by HINARI’s 6,200 biomedical and social sciences journals and other free medical resources available on the internet.

The PNG IMR library can easily identify with other medical libraries in developed countries especially in the area of document access and delivery. The institution’s adequate technical capacity has contributed positively to the library’s ability to source, supply and receive necessary information in a timely manner. The institute scientists, staff and doctors from neighbouring hospital have speedy access to electronic resources from the institute’s newly acquired satellite broad band. Interlibrary lending, document access and delivery are faster and more convenient now than previously, due to the support of compatible technical infrastructure and manpower resources.

Despite the many readily available electronic resources, medical library networks and databases available on the internet, the PNG IMR library mostly interacts and utilises networks and resources it is familiar with. In-country inter-library lending arrangements can be very frustrating and slow and as a result, we are happier working through international networks and suppliers for convenience. Our most popular collaborating partner is GRATISNET, an interlibrary network of Medical Libraries in Australia.

The World Health Organisation has been the major supplier of free medical books and serials to the PNG IMR. It has also provided training and workshops on how to effectively use HINARI. HINARI and PubMed are the most heavily utilised biomedical databases at PNG IMR and continue to be very helpful in our research activities. Scientists are taught how to effectively utilise these resources through the many in-house training courses that we organise. Although there are many other online resources, networks and databases available, they are rarely utilised, mostly due to ignorance of how to access these resources and knowing which resources are available.
PNG IMR is responsible for the compilation of the PNG National Medical Bibliography. It also plays a major role in the production of the PNG Medical Journal.

**Conclusion**

Despite the vast wealth of medical literature readily available in the developed world and easily accessible on the internet, healthcare workers in developing countries like PNG struggle to gain access to them. Barriers to accessibility of health information are compounded by many factors. The most obvious one, is the lack of government and public policies. Decision makers at all levels of authority are either ignorant about the potential of medical library and information services or are more concerned about spending scarce resources on meeting immediate health needs of the general population. Educating decision makers on the importance of access to relevant, reliable and current information for healthcare workers, academics and students, will be a first step toward gaining a better informed health profession.

Finally, it is hoped that through this brief overview of the status of health libraries and information services in PNG, the international medical librarianship body is better informed of the difficulties we face. The most immediate need is to establish and empower a body within the country in consultation with international stakeholders that can develop strategies to improve the standard of medical library and information services within the country and the region.

**References**
