

## **Blue Trunk Library: Project of the World Health Organization Library**

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The Blue Trunk library (BTL) project was set up in 1998 by the World Health Organization library in order to provide appropriate health information in the form of practical manuals and books to health workers in rural centres in developing countries, primarily in Africa (in English or French versions). In many areas the district health centres are staffed by nurses, midwives, community health workers etc. who, having finished their basic studies receive little in the way of continuing education and have no access to up to date, relevant information for their work. Libraries rarely exist at the district level and even in regional hospitals they may contain a sparse collection of obsolete material, often locked away and never used. Professional librarians work primarily in faculties of medicine, ministries, NGOs etc. in the capital cities and have neither the time nor the funding for outreach activities.

A typical district health centre may have a computer but can rarely access the Internet and certainly not with the necessary bandwidth to search for and download health information. In addition, the type of information available on the Internet is not often at the appropriate level or

coverage that would be useful for local staff facing the problems of poor, rural developing countries.

The Blue Trunk library is a collection of some 150 books in all, mainly from WHO and supplemented by commercial material published by NGOs such as TALC, AMREF, Medecins sans Frontieres, the Hesperian Foundation etc. which target paramedical professionals in a developing country environment. The books are arranged by broad subject area such as Essential Drugs, Nutrition, Child Health, General Medicine and Nursing, grouped in cardboard boxes which are filed in a blue metal trunk in which shelves have been installed. Thus, the trunk arrives at its destination fully equipped and only needs to be opened to provide a small ready-to-use library.

Each trunk comes with a manual for the use of the collection, practical tips on its management and upkeep, for example, to make sure the trunk is placed in an area accessible to all staff and not in the chief medical officer's office and to ensure that it is protected from damp and insects. Ideas are provided for the dissemination of the information (creation of simple educational materials such as pictures, booklets and diagrams, using the material as the basis for discussions or public meetings on a specific topic) Health professionals in the field are the best placed to translate and adapt theoretical knowledge to local conditions and to the culture of the populations with whom they deal. Thus the inclusion of locally produced health education tools is also recommended.

There is an essential role of training in the project and this important component is included in the price of each Blue Trunk. It is suggested



that a member of the local staff e.g. a nurse, a health technician, a midwife etc. learn how to manage the trunk and promote its contents although the aim is definitely not to transform them into "barefoot" librarians; their most important qualification is motivation. In countries where there are at least 20 Blue Trunks, a national project coordinator has been designated by the Ministry of Health and training workshops are carried out to assist the group of the local "BTL assistants" to understand the importance of health information and maximise the usage of the trunks. The actual integration of the project into the district health activities depends on the BTL assistant as it has to be accepted by the whole medical community as a genuine means of improving health services. Such training gives the assistants the opportunity to meet their counterparts within a country and to share their experiences and ideas, so that they no longer feel isolated. The training is carried out by the national coordinator as well as librarians from the WHO Regional Office for Africa. In countries where several training sessions (for about 20 assistants) have already taken place, the national coordinator and/or local staff can handle following sessions themselves.

The project would be unable to survive in countries without the support of the Ministry of Health and of the Office of the WHO Representative who secures support from the national authorities and decides with them whether it corresponds to the country's needs. It is also the Representative in conjunction with the Ministry of Health who approaches donors in the embassies or international institutions to obtain funding. The World Bank, the European Union, UNDP and UNICEF have provided funding for the project in various countries. Other bilateral cooperation and aid agencies such as the French, Swiss, Italian and German aid agencies

have responded favourably to requests for funding. Non-governmental organizations such as Save the Children, Merlin, Entre-aide Medical internationale have chosen to include the Blue Trunk libraries in their own health centre projects and a significant number of them have also been funded by the governments out of WHO funds in order to get the project started. However more publicity needs to be given to the project to bring it to the attention of further donor agencies.

The collections (in English and French) are being updated on an on-going basis as new books are published and selection is carefully carried out with the target audience in mind. A new book about clinical microbiology published for an American or UK nurse would not necessarily be appropriate for a district health centre nurse in rural Africa.

Although some trunks have been purchased for countries in other continents, WHO makes it clear that the present collection is aimed at the medical problems found in Africa south of the Sahara and are therefore not always all relevant to the health situation and problems found in other parts of the world. In those cases, the libraries of the WHO Regional Offices in the areas concerned will make their own recommendations for inclusion of locally valid materials. In all, some 1500 Blue Trunks have been distributed in over 60 countries in the world. Each unit costs \$2000 which includes the cost of the books, the trunks, the transport, and the training component of the BTL assistants. For further information please consult the WHO library web-site under country activities (<http://www.who.int/library/country/trunks/index.en.shtml>)



The International Council of Nurses, also based in Geneva, was inspired by this project to set up their own similar activity with the assistance of Merck and Elsevier Science publishers.

## **Supporting the Information needs of Children's Hospices**

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I have been in post at East Anglia's Children's Hospices (EACH) as Library & Information Services Co-ordinator for 12 months. There are two strands to this charitywide service, which are integral to the EACH family-centred model of care: support for staff and other professionals and support for families and other carers. The member of staff (or external professional) wishing to use the service may be a nurse, carer, fundraiser, music therapist, physiotherapist, teacher, educationalist, an EACH volunteer or friend of the hospice – it is open to all. We currently have hospices at Milton (Cambridge), Quidenham (Norfolk) and Ipswich (Suffolk), together with a community outreach team, plus fundraising and retail offices at St Ives and Wymondham.