Building up the Virtual Medical Library in Germany

Ulrich Korwitz
(Deutsche Zentralbibliothek für Medizin, Köln 50924)

The Deutsche Zentralbibliothek für Medizin (German National Library of Medicine[1]) is the National Library and Service Institution for medical libraries and the scientific medical community in Germany. The library was founded in 1970 (with predecessors back to 1910); its holdings amount to more than 1.200.000 volumes including 9.000 current journals. The collections include all subject areas in medicine, dentistry, nursing, human psychology, hospital affairs, human genetics, molecular biology, biotechnology and other fringe areas. Since 2001, literature in the field of nutrition and environment is collected in a branch library in Bonn.

All collections are accessible on site but also for remote users. The library fulfils more than 2.000 orders from users outside the library walls daily. It is the largest document supplier for biomedical literature on the European continent. Copies are dispatched by mail, telefax, e-mail (pdf) and ftp.

The library has always been a focal point for project bound development of new services. In the seventies, it belonged to the first libraries where online orders resulting from database searches were accepted, in the eighties it participated in the ADONIS[2] project. ADONIS allowed the printing of articles stored as full texts on CD-ROM. In the nineties, the German National Library of Medicine was one of the first members of the subito[3] consortium and began building up a pay-per-view service for scientific medical articles in co-operation with the main European biomedical online host DIMDI[4].

Building up the Virtual Medical Library in Germany is its main strategy for the next years to come. The Virtual Medical Library is the result of an interaction of the German National Library of Medicine with other libraries and information agents like online hosts and research institutions. The principle is “Access additional to Holdings”: the digital material is available not only on the servers of the German National Library of Medicine but ready for quick and reliable access on a multitude of servers of co-operation partners via the Internet (Z39.50).

The 2-year project is funded by the German Research Foundation (Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft[5]) within its programme “Digital Library Initiative”. The grant includes funds for two scientific employees and software, altogether 300.000 €.

The project is based on a comprehensive user study on the needs for medical information and literature. In this study the results of 15 personal interviews at a large university clinic and an Internet-based user study with 1.900 replies were put together. This explorative study was performed by the Institute of Empirical Sociology at the University of Cologne. Additionally, the users were confronted with a sample of a portal for a virtual library and asked for their criticism.

The results of the study were:

The demand for information is generally high. Users need a lot of information for scientific work and for patient care. But they have no time to spend up hours for information and literature research. They ask for simple search strategies and one main access point where they can find all the information they need.
The medical library must act as a medical information and literature portal. Users expect a simple and free access to databases, multimedia products, and full texts (in printed or preferably in electronic form) as well as to evaluated Internet links and congress information. Users ask for evaluated information offered to them individually. They desire expert opinion, i.e. individualised and synthesised sets of information prepared for them. Users expect 24-hour access to the medical library during 365 days per year. As a result of insufficient office hours of medical libraries, users turn to the Internet and try to find substitution there.

The study shows clearly that the users urge for a centralised information portal in the Internet guaranteeing access to the complete world of medical information. They ask for simple search strategies and one main access point where they can find all the information they need. This includes free or fee-based literature and factual databases, full texts of scientific journals and books, congress information, evaluated links, and multimedia software. Moreover, especially medical practitioners ask for individualised advice. The Virtual Medical Library will deliver an answer to these needs.

The information portal “MedPilot” coming online in July 2002, will be a search engine providing access to:

- NLM-databases (Medline, Cancerlit, etc.)
- the OPAC of the German National Library of Medicine (433,000 entries, including 16,000 journal titles) and its branch library with collections in the fields of nutrition and environment
- the database of a large German medical bookshop
- the database of Current Contents of more than 900 German scientific medical journals (including 650 not indexed in Medline)
- a database of official German Ministry of Health news and
- a collection of more than 1,000 evaluated medical links.

The collection of databases will grow month by month. A simultaneous search can be performed using a simple search form or a sophisticated form for the advanced user. MedPilot will display the results of the search within seconds.

The databases and the digital material are located not only on the servers of the German National Library of Medicine but on remote servers of cooperating institutions like the German Institute for Medical Information and Documentation (DIMDI) or other libraries. Especially, access to commercial databases is given via DIMDI on a pay-per-citation basis. Following a search, users can get the full texts of commercial journal articles from Kluwer, Springer and Thieme on a pay-per-view basis. More journals from more publishers are to follow soon. For documents not available online, a link to the document delivery system of the German National Library of Medicine with its largest collection of medical literature in Europe will be established. Documents can be ordered for pdf-delivery. Whenever fee-based services are selected, the user has to provide authorisation. Whenever a customer likes to buy a book from the commercial bookstore, he can switch to its e-commerce offers.

A profile service has just been added: users can get new pieces of information or news according to their profile of interest in user-defined intervals by e-mail.
Altogether, the Virtual Library of Medicine will be an one-stop-shop for everybody in need for medical information and documents. The progress in building it up will last 2 to 3 years; it will be monitored by the customers and evaluated by user studies in regular intervals.

References

[8] The criteria used for the evaluation are those of the White Paper “Criteria for assessing the quality of health information on the Internet” by Helga Rippen: credibility, content, disclosure, links, design, interactivity and caveats.

Author: Ulrich Korwitz
Direktor
Deutsche Zentralbibliothek für Medizin
Joseph-Stelzmann-Str. 9
50924 Köln
Email: ulrich.korwitz@uni-koeln.de
Tel.: 0221 478 5600
Fax: 0221 478 7102