

The practice library

DESPITE the exciting developments in electronic communication most doctors still learn by reading; the convenience of the printed text and the flexibility it allows in deciding where and when it can be used means that, at least for the next few years, books and journals will remain the principal source of information for practising clinicians.

The literature of general practice is relatively new. There are still general practitioners in post who qualified when general practice had virtually no literature of its own and who grew up in a world where all the books and journals about their work came from outside general practice. The new generation, however, including all those who have been vocationally trained, has learnt its craft at a time when much about general practice has been written down. There is now a torrent of books on the subject, most of which have been written by general practitioners themselves.

In the 1960s, following the stimulus of the postgraduate medical centre movement, it was generally considered that the natural place to have the books for the district was in the district medical library. Nowadays, however, it is considered much more important to have books and journals, as far as possible, in the setting where they will be most used and as close as possible to where patients are actually seen. Hospitals have a long tradition of departmental libraries and the practice library can be seen as the general practice equivalent.

The practice library is a powerful indication of the practice's involvement with the literature of general practice,¹ and a practice which does not have a reasonable general practice section is making an important statement to its visitors about the relatively low priority its partners give to the development of their discipline. For there is no general practitioner today who can possibly claim to know it all. The whole basis of practice is constantly changing and all of us are increasingly dependent on colleagues for information and new ideas. The general practice section of the library needs to reflect this change and adapt to new ideas if it is to provide all the partners in a practice with a readily accessible source of intellectual stimulation.

In training practices this has been a special requirement since the earliest days when the Joint Committee's *Criteria for the selection of trainers in general practice*² laid down that the trainer should be 'familiar with the literature of his subject' and be able to talk about it and teach the next generation. This is why practice libraries have tended to develop more quickly in training practices and why some training practices allow a fixed sum or proportion of the trainer's grant, say 5%, as an annual budget for books and journals.

How big the general practice section of the practice library should be is currently under debate. In many training practices 30 to 50 books on general practice can now be seen and in some the general practice section is better than in postgraduate medical centre libraries.

As far as journals are concerned, there are now at least three important journals concentrating on original material published in English: the *Journal of the Royal College of General Practitioners* (which started in 1958), the *Journal of Family Practice* (1972), followed more recently by *Family Practice* (1984). Each of these now has a claim to be well read and kept, and surely every practice should have bound copies of at least one of these, so that the major developments in the discipline can be referred to immediately and without difficulty.

The question of expense can no longer be regarded as an issue. Most general practitioners are in partnerships of three or four.

The average turnover of such practices will be at least £200 000 a year and spending 0.1% of the budget on binding the only *Journal* of its only College cannot be impossible.

Two booklets have recently appeared to help practices who want to start practice libraries. The first, called *Starting a practice library*³ has been published by the Association of Health Centre Managers and Practice Administrators and *The practice library*, written by Margaret Hammond, RCGP Stuart Librarian, has now been published jointly by the College and Stuart Pharmaceuticals.

The practice library is based on a series of visits to practices and detailed discussion about library arrangements in different parts of the country. Clearly presented, with plenty of illustrations, it offers step-by-step guidance on how to set up and run a library, and can be warmly recommended to all those who wish to develop this aspect of their practice.

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References

1. Gray DJP. Preparing the practice for teaching: the practice library. In: Hall MS (ed). *A GP training handbook*. Oxford: Blackwell Scientific, 1983: 34-39.
2. Joint Committee on Postgraduate Training for General Practice. *Criteria for the selection of trainers in general practice*. London: JCPTGP, 1976.
3. Norman J. *Starting a practice library*. London: Association of Health Centre and Practice Administrators, 1988.

The practice library is available, free of charge, from the Central Sales Office, Royal College of General Practitioners, 14 Princes Gate, Hyde Park, London SW7 1PU.

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