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BRIEF COMMUNICATIONS

A health sciences library liaison project to support biotechnology research

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INTRODUCTION

The National Library of Medicine (NLM) has identified the organization and management of biotechnology information as a high priority for the next two decades and predicts a thousand-fold increase in biotechnology research data over a five-year period. In proposing the creation of a National Center for Biotechnology Information, NLM emphasized that the "problems of scientific research in biotechnology are increasingly problems of information science" [1]. Following the initiative of NLM, the Houston Academy of Medicine-Texas Medical Center (HAM-TMC) Library has appointed an information services librarian as liaison to clients involved in biotechnology research.

Located on the 550-acre campus of Houston's Texas Medical Center, the HAM-TMC Library serves over twenty nonprofit, health-related institutions; a local medical society of approximately 7,000 members; twelve area hospitals contracting for library services; and additional fee-based clients. Described here are reasons why Houston is emphasizing the development of a biotechnology industry, present responsibilities of the biotechnology liaison, and new HAM-TMC Library clients involved in biotechnology-related research.

TARGETING BIOTECHNOLOGY

Houston, among the fastest growing areas in the country during the early 1980s, did an abrupt about-face in the middle of the decade as oil prices plummeted and Houston's petroleum-based economy faced large company layoffs, shrinking real-estate values, and bank reorganizations that are still ongoing today. Now, Houston is showing slow but steady economic recovery. An important lesson learned is the need for a more diversified local economy, one better able to withstand oil price fluctuations.

Civic leaders have chosen biotechnology as an important industry to develop and promote in Houston and the Gulf coast area. In 1988 Biotech Initiatives

was founded in Houston to support local biotechnology development through meetings, newsletters, and conference sponsorship. Presently, Biotech Initiatives' directory of biotechnology-related businesses for the Houston and Gulf coast area contains forty-five entries [2]. The cochairman predicted that biotechnology will be a \$4 billion-a-year industry in Houston by the year 2000 [3].

LIAISON ACTIVITIES

The biotechnology liaison position is a dynamic one, with duties and directions that evolve according to client and library needs. Initiated as a prototype program, documentation of liaison activities will be used to evaluate the costs and benefits of assigning library resources to specific subject areas and client groups.

Responsibilities of the liaison include

- developing and maintaining subject expertise in biotechnology;
- becoming proficient in using relevant information sources, both printed and online;
- serving the information needs of biotechnology clients and promoting strong, interactive relationships;
- providing education and training in biotechnology to library personnel;
- representing the multidisciplinary interests of biotechnology clients to collection development committees; and
- exploring the ability of new databases to improve access to biotechnology research results.

The biotechnology liaison averages thirty-five hours per month serving the needs of the Baylor College of Medicine, Center for Biotechnology (CBT). Opened in 1987, this 36,000-square-foot facility is already deeply involved in a variety of biotechnology research projects using techniques such as high-performance liquid chromatography, immunocytochemistry, and recombinant DNA. Because CBT is thirty-five miles from the Texas Medical Center, initial liaison efforts have concentrated on providing needed library services to this remote location and expediting transfers of library materials and information requests through couriers and telefacsimile. Use of the liaison often enables researchers to meet information needs without leaving their laboratories.

NEW BIOTECHNOLOGY CLIENTS

During the past year, the HAM-TMC Library added two new client groups with biotechnology interests. The Johnson Space Center (JSC) of Houston is cur-

rently blending their traditional commitment to space exploration with biotechnology research. Activities of "Spaceweek '89," commemorating the twentieth anniversary of man's first walk on the moon, included a medical symposium focusing on past medical spin-offs from NASA research and the future commercialization of space biomedical technology.

Current research at JSC includes the use of bioreactors in outer space to accomplish tasks that would be much more difficult or costly on earth. In this environment of microgravity, clot-dissolving enzymes and anticancer drugs can be processed more readily. Fragile human tissues can be grown without the sedimentation of cells that occurs in the earth's gravity.

Within the TMC campus, construction progresses for Texas A&M University's Institute for Biosciences and Technology. This \$21.5 million, eleven-story research tower is scheduled for completion in the spring of 1991 [4]. This is to be followed by an additional research tower equal in size and facilities to the first. Current Texas A&M biotechnology research is diverse, but much of it is related to human health. Because cattle are susceptible to a number of diseases that resemble those found in humans, researchers are working hard to help map the bovine genome. Additional research uses genetic material from the blowfly to clone a family of proto-oncogenes. These genes have many similarities to those suspected of causing neoplasms in humans and other mammals.

CONCLUSIONS

It is difficult to predict the actual impact biotechnology will have on our future health, but considering that approximately 2,000 human disorders are caused by a defect within a single gene, the possibilities are almost limitless [5]. Recognizing biotechnology's enormous potential, NLM is taking steps to meet its unique information challenges. The HAM-TMC Library is targeting biotechnology for special development and support; at the same time, the library furthers Houston's endeavors to diversify its economy and become a recognized center for the biotechnology industry.

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After the flood: disaster response and recovery planning*

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Hospital libraries occupy space in patient care centers where clinical staff are faced with biological hazards during the course of daily patient care. While an increasing emphasis has been placed on practice of universal blood and bodily fluid precautions for those with direct patient contact, little discussion has been concerned with hospital support personnel who are subject to risk but remain unfamiliar with sound infection control practices. All health care center employees, including the hospital library staff, should learn infection control procedures to prevent biological contamination resulting from disasters within their work environment. Many libraries with irreplaceable collections are situated in aging institutions where plumbing, wiring, or insulation do not meet today's stringent building standards. A carefully maintained library collection can be compromised by the frailty of the building that houses it. Only with well-planned disaster control policies and procedures, subject to regular review and revision, can a library staff prevent a devastating loss when a damaging event takes place.

The library of The Hospital for Sick Children, Toronto, is a large, well-equipped facility. The collection contains 7,000 monographs, 600 journal subscriptions, and 26,000 bound journal volumes. The library occupies 7,000 square feet on the first floor of the center wing in a forty-year-old hospital building. Directly above the library are ten floors of pediatric patient rooms, operating theaters, and laboratories.

THE FLOOD

In August 1987, staff arrived to discover that a plumbing leak had occurred sometime during the previous

* Based on a paper presented May 22, 1989, at the Eighty-Ninth Annual Meeting of the Medical Library Association, Boston, Massachusetts.