EDITORIAL

Commitment and concern: the Sixtieth Annual International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions meeting, Havana, Cuba, August 1994

As conference delegates entered Havana for the first International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions (IFLA) conference ever held in the Caribbean or Latin America, Cubans were embarking on makeshift rafts across the Straits of Florida. From the Hotel Riviera, the home of many Canadian delegates during the meeting, residents could catch a glimpse of these fragile boats. As IFLA President Wedgeworth remarked, “IFLA has met in Havana and it will never be the same again.” It is true that this statement may be made about every IFLA meeting, but it is even more true for Havana.

Each delegate who participates in the IFLA meeting carries away unique memories of the conference. This meeting was unique in the commitment of the Cuban librarians to provide delegates with the best possible experience in the face of adverse conditions. They succeeded. The conference facilities provided by the Palacio de las Convenciones were the finest, with a superb hall well equipped for simultaneous translation in all official IFLA languages and numerous meeting rooms of various sizes all in one center. An on-site cafeteria and bar, providing superb Cuban coffee, sustained delegates through five full days of programming and cultural events. One example of the concern and commitment of Cuban librarians toward the delegates was the provision of terminals for electronic correspondence by delegates to their home country. Delegates were able to receive electronic mailboxes in advance of the IFLA meeting and leave their address at home. This facility was especially appreciated, because Cuba is not on the Internet, and connectivity was provided via BIT-NET through a node in Canada with the assistance of the National Library of Canada.

The opening session of the congress was particularly significant this year because of the president’s announcement of the development of IFLANET through the efforts of IFLA, SilverPlatter Information, and the IFLA Core Program based at the National Library of Canada. An IFLA server will be set up to handle all IFLA documents and newsletters. Reacting to the anticipated criticism that not all colleagues have Internet access, Wedgeworth remarked, “a rising tide lifts all boats.” Emphasizing the value of a more informed membership, he recognized that it was easier to extend IFLA communication than it was to extend the information infrastructure worldwide. Delegates were delighted at this announcement of a virtual IFLA.

For the past year, I had been in contact with Cuban colleagues in my capacity as chair of the Section on Biological and Medical Sciences Libraries. In an effort to recruit Spanish-speaking members to the section, a Spanish-language version of the IFLA brochure was prepared and distributed at the session. In addition to chairing two meetings of the standing Committee on Biological and Medical Sciences Libraries and representing the standing committee on IFLA’s Coordinating Board, the chair of the committee is responsible for the professional program during the annual congress. The opportunity to meet in a unique location each year allows delegates to learn about information delivery in that location. Dr. Jeremias Hernandez Ojito, head of the National Center of Medical Science Information, Ministry of Public Health, Havana, generously assisted in providing names of distinguished librarians in Latin America and the Caribbean, and his advice provided delegates with an excellent program. The program was considered of sufficient quality and general interest to be designated for simultaneous interpretation by IFLA headquarters.

Four speakers from Latin America and the Caribbean provided a comprehensive view of health information services. Dr. Ojito discussed the organization of service and the information programs in his paper on the national information system for the health sciences libraries in Cuba. His overview was expanded in a paper by Pedro Urra Gonzalez, assistant head, on computer networks for medical information in Cuba, in which he emphasized the use of listservs for continuing education and reference questions. Celia Zaher Ribero, director of the Latin American and Caribbean Center on Health Sciences Information, Brazil, described this regional system for information in the health sciences, which emphasizes the information system of the U.S. National Library of Medicine, operating as a regional MEDLARS branch. Of particular interest was the description in Dr. Zaher’s paper of the database LILACS (Latin American and Caribbean Health Sciences Literature), an indispensable bibliographic tool for supplementing information in MEDLINE. LILACS is also available on CD-ROM. The first part of the program concluded with a paper by Alec de Acosta, head, Medical Sciences Information Center of the Central University in Venezuela, on the national system for bio-

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medical documentation and information (SINADIB) of Venezuela.

The second part of the program focused on specific strategies for health sciences information delivery and was presented by colleagues from McGill University, Montreal, Canada. Marcos Silva described the Internet and developments in the provision of electronic medical information, and Sharon Grant evaluated the success of ADONIS in meeting medical information needs in the developing world. Both sessions were well attended, and discussion after the presentations was stimulating.

The professional program presented by the sections of IFLA is the most stimulating aspect of the meeting, providing an opportunity to learn and, more importantly, to develop contacts in other countries that may lead to further collaboration. Resource sharing is on everyone’s agenda these days, and the Cuban delegates were very open to collaboration, especially with Canadian colleagues. Further communication will result in collaborative experiments between libraries in these countries.

Presentation of a quality program requires advance planning, and the focus of the standing committee is always the future. Thanks to the assistance of Dr. Shawky Salem, director of information, Arab Center for Medical Literature, Kuwait, the Open Forum Program for this year’s meeting in Istanbul, Turkey, is already complete; this program will focus on Islam and its influence on medicine and health sciences libraries. In 1996, when the Congress convenes in Beijing, People’s Republic of China, the theme is “The Challenge of Change: Libraries and Economic Development.” Preliminary discussion focused on issues of copyright ownership, the importance of standards in information exchange, and links between the developed and developing world in the exchange of information.

After five intensive days of meetings, the congress concluded with formal invitations from the next year’s hosts in Turkey, followed by an invitation to Beijing in 1996 extended in flawless Spanish by the head of the Chinese delegation to IFLA.

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