SOFTWARE REVIEW


The official Directory of Board Certified Medical Specialists in print is one of the most common and heavily used reference works found in medical libraries. Its organization (alphabetically by specialty, then by state and city, with an index of personal names in the last volume) is easy to use and makes it useful in many ways. The Directory allows librarians to respond easily to questions such as “Is Bill Hersh board-certified and what else can you tell me about him?” or “Are there any certified Emergency Medicine Physicians in Boring, Oregon?” There is an 800 number to find physicians who may be too recently certified for the latest printing. Every reference librarian knows where it is on the shelf and how to use it. Best of all, looking something up is fast. What, then, are the advantages of having this important work on CD-ROM? One obvious disadvantage is the price per annum: approximately $475 for the printed version, and nearly $1,200 for the CD-ROM, which includes a semiannual update. Important advantages of the electronic version are Boolean search functions, searching on many more parts of a record, and the ability to print results. Once the computer is booted up, searching is fast and easy to learn. Since the utility of this major reference work is assumed, this review will consider the pros and cons of the printed and electronic versions.

Some of the front matter from the printed Directory is in the manual that accompanies the CD-ROM. Full contact information for the specialty boards is provided. Telephone numbers, online bulletin boards, and the Reed Reference Home Page (www.reedref.com) are listed for technical support. Users may send for a free 250-page document with information about the various boards and statistical data on physicians’ geographic and specialty dispersion.

Once loaded from the CD onto the hard drive, the program boots up quickly. It is currently available only for DOS, but a Windows version is due in the fall of 1996. Using the software is easy for anyone familiar with DOS applications. Arrow, Esc, Ctrl, Alt, PgUp/Dn, and Function keys provide navigation, move from the search screen to records, and enable display and printing. Menu options are displayed at every step and the Help screens are clear. Less-than-obvious functions are quitting and clearing the work space of search strategies. Both are found under the Action option on the menu bar. The only frustrations this reviewer encountered were having the program “hang” when a search involved too many truncations and Boolean operators at once, and the reduction of the program to an icon when the Windows screen-saver interrupted. This latter occurrence is not a problem if Windows is not loaded on the same machine but, with the proliferation of Windows, users may want to know that it may happen.

Full Boolean operation is possible both within a single line of search strategy and with combined lines. Truncation is flexible with either $ or * for unlimited characters or ? for single characters. Two-letter field abbreviations and their explanations are displayed on the search screen. Searching is accomplished by typing a field abbreviation followed by an equals, less-than, or greater-than sign and the desired character string, truncated if necessary (for example: na = schwartz for name or by > 1950 for birth year or kw = wom?n for keyword.). One of the strengths of the electronic version of this work is the ability to combine many fields that are not searchable in print. Birth and death dates, place of education, zip and area codes, items from earlier in the career, and type of practice can all be not only searched but also truncated both terminally and internally. Thus, whatever scraps of information one has may find the desired result. There is even a free-form “keyword” search that finds character strings in most parts of the record. A caveat, as users of the printed work know, is that the amount of information supplied by the physician varies greatly. If the physician has not supplied the scrap known to the user, the search may be in vain.

Boolean operators may be used to find very specific information and to supply lists of all the occurrences of certain parameters (the age of all the obstetricians in Boston, for example). There is also a Browse mode for each field in which one can find a name or date or city, for example, and then add the results to the search screen.

The Alt-F command changes print formats among Brief, Standard, Preset Custom, Dynamic Custom, Detailed, and Mail Label. What is chosen stays in effect until changed again, which is a consideration if the program is to be loaded in a public area where the next user may not be aware of the changes. The print options are, however, another strength of the CD-ROM. Instead of photocopying tiny entries from a page, printouts can be customized even to the point of providing mailing labels.

What are the decision criteria for libraries considering this product? For researchers seeking out colleagues and clinicians interested in locating sites and personnel for...
telemedicine projects, the Boolean search capabilities across so many fields are very useful. Libraries serving multiple sites, in clinics or separate buildings, will appreciate the networking advantage. The pattern for network pricing is:

- two to four users: $1,792.50
- five to ten users: $2,390
- eleven to twenty-five users: $2,987.50

There is a price break between print and electronic versions for four users or more. For the single-site library with one print copy, the decision may not be so clear. Librarians generally resist the idea of replacing printed works with electronic versions. Issues to consider include the need for a consistent historical collection; the permanence of the medium and the ability of future equipment to use it; the portability of printed material; the fact that no computer skills are needed for printed works; the convenience of books on the shelf that do not require power, booting up, software installation, and printer maintenance; and finally the fact many libraries deny access to computers to unaffiliated users but provide printed tools to all. Therefore, if a library decides to keep the printed version, the amount of use it receives and the advantages noted above may be the crucial factors.

This product provides fast, easy, and powerful searching of a database of proven utility in health sciences libraries. With Windows, ease of use will be enhanced. For networks, it would be highly desirable. For libraries with the resources to buy this program, it is a fine complement to a reference collection.

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