



Preface

The meanings, as well as the challenges that emanate from the decision to build the Virtual Health Library for Latin America and the Caribbean are extraordinary.

This decision was reached by the members of the Latin American and Caribbean Health Sciences Information System on occasion of its Sixth Meeting held at the end of March 1998, in San José, Costa Rica. The System is being coordinated in the regional area by PAHO, through its center BIREME—Latin American and Caribbean Center on Health Sciences Information. It is formed by national systems that operate networks of libraries and documentation centers in health sciences.

All the representatives of the Latin American and Caribbean countries

attending the meeting discussed and approved the Declaration of San José, by which they assumed individually and jointly the commitment to build the Virtual Health Library, in accordance to the proposal submitted by BIREME. At the same time, they urged the national authorities as well as the technical cooperation and development agencies to reorient their programs, actions, and resource application in the same direction. Building the Virtual Health Library represents the articulated and organized response of the libraries and documentation centers in health of the Latin American and the Caribbean countries to the challenge of moving the traditional operation of information products and services to the new paradigm established by Internet.

This act, in itself, reveals once more the effort that, continuously, recurrently, and jointly, hundreds of libraries and documentation centers in health of Latin America and the Caribbean have been devoting, the last three decades, to the processes of renewal and adaptation to new organizational and information treatment paradigms. All these efforts are made with a view to enhancing the fulfillment of its social mission of promoting and implementing the collection, organization, and dissemination of scientific and technical information. This persistence, that characterizes the position of its leaders, and professionals, expresses their awareness of how crucial this task is for the improvement of health. No other meaning seems to precede this one, taking into consideration the enormous difficulties and restrictions of resources, both material and informational, suffered by public institutions in the



area of scientific and technical information.

The proposal of the Virtual Health Library also represents the full reaffirmation of the principle and commitment to operate in network as the central mechanism of technical cooperation in the scientific and technical information process. This cooperation means research, development, and operation of information products and services at national and international levels. The principle of networking is the common denominator characterizing the 30 years of cooperation among libraries and documentation centers in health notwithstanding the successive substitution of several models of operation of products and information services. The emergence of the Internet comes to consecrate this principle.

Another meaning, not less important, is the encouraging panorama that the construction of the Virtual Library presents for the community of health professionals with respect to the fast and efficient access to relevant and up-to-date information. Operating in the Internet, the Library will progressively become a virtual space with a broad collection of the most varied sources of scientific and technical health information of Latin America and the Caribbean. It will provide universal access, regardless location of the users and the servers, and totally compatible with the main international systems. The great expectation for the coming years is a notable progress in the number and quality of available sources of information to the public and, thus, a progress in the degree of satisfaction of information demands.

The Virtual Health Library collection is distinguished from the set of information resources on the Internet because of its quality controls and previously established common methodologies, a condition that has characterized operations of the Latin American and Caribbean System on Health Sciences Information.

The Virtual Health Library will operate comprehensively under the Internet model, particularly, the World Wide Web (WWW) hypermedia service, which means the adoption of a context in which a broad and continuous communication predominates. This context will break gradually the barriers of space and time inherent to the operating environment of information products and services related to hard copy collections. Another determining factor in the communication context promoted by Internet is the predominance of the user initiative that interacts with distributed information sources and/or with other users in an *ad hoc* process to satisfy their information needs.

Certainly, the members of the Regional System, in their decision, visualized the enormous challenge that construction and operation of the Virtual Health Library represents. The challenge begins closely and immediately with the organizational developments that should be implemented in their own information units, and be extended to the reformulation of the *modus operandi* of the networks and national systems of libraries and documentation centers. These organizational developments are necessary so that the libraries and documentation centers adjust and respond locally to the conditions imposed by the model of information treatment that governs operations of the Internet and particularly of the Virtual Health Library.



A fundamental element in the national systems renewal is the expansion of its network of alliances with scientific and technical health information producers and intermediary agents so that all the initiatives and actions converge towards the Virtual Health Library. These alliances will not be limited to health issues since inter-sectoral societies, involving public and private entities and initiatives will certainly contribute with positive results, mainly, in strengthening the information technology infrastructure that serves the institutions and users of the area of health.

It is important to recognize that not all users of scientific and technical health information, current and potential, as well as not all the sources of information will be connected in the Internet in an immediate future. Hence, over a good period of time, the libraries and documentation centers will operate simultaneously products and information services in the traditional, as well as, in the Virtual Health Library. Meanwhile, the priority in infrastructure and/or new sources of information investment should concentrate on the Virtual Health Library. This situation is certainly complex and challenging and it is not easy to anticipate and prepare simple solutions. Hence it is important to be aware that this is a process impregnated with research, experimentation, learning, evaluation, and search for auto-reference, at least in the early years. Intensive communication among the leader and professionals involved, internally in the countries, and among the countries, will be essential to disseminate experiences and achievements.

The Virtual Health Library, in its conception, is not a rupture of the system that currently operates at the regional level and in the

countries. On the contrary, it represents an expansion of the current model in several senses, such as the transfer of the initiative to the user in the process of communication, the expansion of the arch of alliances of producers and intermediary agents, the operation of multimedia information sources, etc.

The promise of an extraordinary expansion for the decentralized operation of information sources is, probably, the meaning of more strategic political character emanating from the proposal of the Virtual Health Library. Its acceptance by the professional community in health will place the VHL as the confluence of the sources of health information generated in all the areas of the health sector of each country. Regionally, this confluence will mold continually and dynamically the virtual space of the Library.

The Virtual Health Library should not become panacea. The debate aimed at criticizing and enriching its formulation, based on the local conditions and under the principle of equity in the access to sources of information and the process of construction and operation of the Virtual Health Library is fundamental. In this regard, two are the objectives that motivated BIREME to publish this book. The first one is to disseminate the proposal of construction of the Virtual Health Library. The second objective is to point out and promote the discussion on the multitude of meanings and challenges that the construction of the Virtual Health Library represents.



Thus, in addition to the *Declaration of San José*, and the basic document formulating the proposal of the Virtual Health Library - *BIREME and the Latin American and Caribbean System on Health Sciences Information: Towards the Virtual Health Library*, this book publishes a selection of conferences presented in the IV Pan American Congress on Health Sciences Information (CRICS IV), carried out jointly with the VI Meeting of the System. These conferences make it possible for us to expand the debate about the construction of the Library considering, not only the intrinsic issues to its formulation, but also the context formed by the complex subjects and challenges facing the Latin American and Caribbean countries, and the international agencies, such as, the process of globalization, the promotion of the socioeconomic development particularly in health, the progress in science and technology, and the promotion of technical cooperation.

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