

HOW TO USE THE
ARMY MEDICAL LIBRARY

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“How may I obtain books and articles about a medical subject in which I am interested?” “If I do not know the exact title of a medical book or the exact reference to an article in a journal, how can I find it?” “If I want to review the literature about some medical topic, how should I proceed?” “If I should like to know the latest medical or surgical treatment for a certain clinical condition, how may I get it?” “Is it necessary for me to have special permission to borrow books from the Army Medical Library?” “If I want a book from the Surgeon General’s Library, do I have to pay the postage or express charges on having it sent me, and for its return?” “Does the Army Medical Library also contain material on dental and veterinary medicine, on public health, on sanitary engineering, on psychology, etc., etc.?”

These are a few of the questions that are asked, directly or indirectly, every day in the year of the Librarian of the Army Medical Library. Though the subject is more or less covered in Army Regulations, many medical officers never think of looking there for the answer. Many of them have never attempted writing a scientific paper and are at a loss to know how to go about it. Many medical officers, long on duty in Washington and vicinity, have never visited the Army Medical Library and Museum and consider them far away entities of which they have had but vague knowledge.

The matter is really very simple. Every officer of the Army, Navy and Public Health Service has at his command the richest existing storehouse of medical information. Among the world’s great collections of medical literature the Army Medical Library stands first. It is the largest and the most complete. To obtain a book or a journal article or a report or a document, it is only necessary to write the Librarian and say so. Only two classes of material are not sent out on loan. First, the very rare books which could not be replaced if lost. Of such works the Army Medical Library has by far the finest collection in America and

one of the most complete in the world. The other class of restricted material consist of unbound journals and documents. It has been found that it is much easier to lose an unbound journal than a whole bound volume. For some reason a reader does not respect what appears to be only a pamphlet of comparatively few pages, though the loss of it may break the Library's file. No modern library allows unbound journals to leave its reading rooms. Another reason is that current publications are in great demand and it is unfair to readers to have such material sent out on loans, and so remain out of reach of the general reading public for long periods of time.

The Index Catalogue of the Army Medical Library has been called "America's Greatest Contribution to Medicine." This statement was made long ago in Europe by Virchow the great pathologist. It has been repeated again and again here. Dr. William H. Welch, on the last of his visits to the Army Medical Library before his death, said that if he were asked what America's greatest contributions to medical science have been he would answer: (1) The discovery of the mode of transmission of yellow fever; (2) the discovery of anaesthesia; (3) the development of the public health laboratory, in all that the term implies, and (4) the Army Medical Library and its Index Catalogue. And he added. "The greatest of these is the last." Weighty words these, and from the Dean of American Medicine.

If a reader go into any of the world's great medical libraries, in London, Tokio, Buenos Aires, Paris, New York or any other center of medical knowledge, and seek to study the literature on any medical subject, the first working tool put into his hands is the Index Catalogue of the Army Medical Library, the most comprehensive piece of bibliography ever attempted in any field of learning. It was founded by Deputy Surgeon General John Shaw Billings, the real builder of the Army Medical Library. He evolved it after many years of study and consultation with the great medical men of the world. Under his personal direction the First Series was published, and since his time the Second and Third Series were published according to the same plan. The Fourth Series is now in course of preparation.

The *Index Catalogue* is arranged alphabetically by authors and by subjects. The subjects are appropriately subdivided and

it is very simple to find the desired subject. One looks in each of the three series, for the titles are never reprinted, the Index Catalogue being one unit. In a few moments it is possible for the reader to have before him the titles of the entire subject in which he is interested, or the complete bibliography of an author. One volume of the Catalogue is printed each year, covering approximately one letter of the alphabet, so that for the three series now complete there are three "A" volumes, three "B" volumes and so forth. For completeness all three must be consulted.

Dr. Billings realized that since it takes about 25 years to complete a series of the Catalogue, a supplemental publication was needed. Something was required in which the reader could find what had been published in a particular year. In the majority of instances a reader is interested chiefly in the material of the current year. Therefore Dr. Billings established the *Index Medicus*. This quarterly, though edited and prepared in the Army Medical Library, was never a Government publication. It was financed by the Carnegie Institution until 1931, when it was combined with the *Quarterly Cumulative Index* of the American Medical Association. It has, since 1927, been published from the American Medical Association's offices in Chicago, as the *Quarterly Cumulative Index Medicus*.

The Army Medical Library, also known as The Surgeon General's Library or the Library of The Surgeon General's Office, is no new institution. It was founded in 1818 by Surgeon General Lovell. It grew slowly, however, until the advent of the master mind. Dr. Billings is entitled to be called the Father of the Army Medical Library. Shortly after the Civil War he began to plan a great medical library. At that time he said that nowhere in the country could a physician find the references to modern medical literature, particularly foreign literature, in the whole of the American continent. A sum of about \$80,000. remaining from the Civil War hospital fund, was made available for his purpose and he began his purchases.

He had not gone far before realizing that a mere collection of medical books and journals, no matter how extensive, was of little use unless properly and completely catalogued. He did not envisage only a list of books. He planned a mighty bibliography which in one alphabet would include the names of

authors, the titles of books, and the titles of all worth while articles in every issue of every journal. Nothing so stupendous had ever before been attempted in the library field. He spent no less than fifteen years studying and perfecting his plans, asking and receiving the advice and opinions of the leading medical men of every land. A specimen fasciculus was sent out for further comment and at length the final plan of the Index Catalogue was adopted. It is a monument to his genius and in no other field of human knowledge does there exist such a work.

The Army Medical Library looked, in a literary way, both forward and backward. Not only was the best of current literature obtained, but a systematic effort was made to acquire the great medical classics of the past. Books printed before the year 1500 are known as *incunabula*, that is, books published while printing was in its infancy, the term being derived from the Latin word meaning a cradle. It is estimated that about 600 medical incunabula are known. Of this number the Army Medical Library possesses copies of about 550. Copies of the other fifty are so rare as to be practically unobtainable, though we now have a system of exchanging complete photostats of our rare books with other libraries, and in this way have obtained photographic copies of a number of the books of which we have not the original. There are also, of course, many exceedingly rare books printed after 1500, and of them the Library has a generous store. Medical manuscripts, written before the invention of printing, are also to be found in this storehouse of medical literature, as are also rare prints, broadsides, drawings, photographs, and the like. The collection of portraits of great medical men is extensive, and is often useful for medical officers.

To-day the library receives some 2000 medical journals from all over the world, and still indexes every worth-while article in *every* issue of *every* one of them, regardless of language. Recently reduced funds due to cuts in the appropriations and the fall of the dollar in terms of European currencies, have made it impossible for the Library to obtain all new books, but the files of journals are kept intact. It is obvious that while it may be possible to obtain books at a later date, to suspend important medical journals would be a serious blow to the Library as many of the gaps thus created could never be filled. This does not

mean, however, that no new books are being acquired. Many gifts are made to the Library by authors who realize the value of having their works indexed in the Index Catalogue. Moreover, the Copyright Office usually turns over to the Army Medical Library one of the two books required for deposit in this office when an American book is copyrighted, if the subject be in the broad field of medical science.

The Library's collection is not confined to works on medicine in the narrow sense. The whole of medical science is included. Thus, works on dentistry, veterinary medicine, psychology, public health, hygiene, history of medicine, etc., are all included. In the words of the Librarian of Congress, the Army Medical Library is one of the specialized collections, such as the Library of the Department of Agriculture, the Geological Survey, etc., which, with the Library of Congress, form the National Library of the United States. It is an institution of which the Army may well feel proud. It is a willing servant, and to secure its assistance the Medical, Dental, Veterinary or Administrative Officer has but to make his needs known. The Index Catalogue is on file at the General Hospitals, Corps Area Headquarters and at the larger posts, and a glance at it will show the reader how easy it is to use. But even if no catalogue is at hand, a letter to the Army Medical Library will bring information and assistance to the clinician, sanitarian or writer, drawn from the institution's collection of more than a million items. Obviously, with the Library's limited staff, the abstracting or translating of articles cannot be undertaken; but in the few cases where the actual material cannot be loaned, general information as to the contents of such restricted material will be furnished. The medical officer receives and returns such publications under the official frank, not being required to pay transportation charges as are other readers who obtain books and journals under the inter-library loan system. Personal visits to the Library well repay the brief time required. The Army Medical Library and Museum are visited annually by upwards of 75,000 people. Some of the leading medical works of this and other countries have literally been written in the Library's reading rooms.

Writing is an art, but it is one which may be acquired. The writing of a scientific paper benefits not only readers but likewise the author. Medical officers of our service have made some of the most notable contributions to science in the country's history. But without a proper exposition of scientific findings and other data, the research worker or clinician cannot expect to receive due credit for his efforts.

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