LETTER TO THE EDITOR: MEDICAL DOCUMENTALISTS IN MALTA

What are German Medical Documentation students doing in Malta?

We are three students, spending eleven weeks of practical training at the Health Services Information Unit (HSIU). An article in the last issue of this journal gave an overview of the tasks and the objectives of the unit.

In order to give you an idea of what we are doing here, we would like to provide some information about our profession in Germany.

Due to social developments and progress in medical research, the public health system has been faced with completely new tasks. Chronic diseases, geriatric diseases, multimorbidity and non-specific diseases have markedly increased. In addition, specialisation and the improved accuracy of diagnostic methods generate a greater amount of data than in former times. Nowadays, a patient is usually treated by more than one physician. Thus, the importance of information exchange amongst the attending doctors is growing. Moreover, the early detection and prevention of non-communicable as well as infectious illnesses raise new problems in the field of medical documentation, because a lot of data has to be stored and evaluated, mostly by computer. Today it has become impossible for a physician to fulfill these tasks our curriculum includes topics like medicine, documentation and occupational information. We learn programming in two languages, PASCAL and FORTRAN. The statistical field is also very important for us and we are taught descriptive and vital statistics.

As a result of the wide range of topics covered by our training, medical documentalists are employed by hospitals, pharmaceutical industries, university and research facilities for medical documentation, computer science and statistics, medical libraries, literature services and other institutions that could be compared with HSIU.

Thus, what are medical documentalists doing here?

Firstly we were given an overview of the hospital, its facilities and the special situation of Malta as a small island in the field of medical documentation.

After becoming acquainted with the different running projects of the unit, we took part mainly in statistical applications. We helped in the analysis of data regarding a smoking survey that had been carried out among doctors. Another task was to assist the local workers with quality assessment as well as in the analysis of the eye disease survey. Besides, we were involved in the planning for the mid-point survey of the MONICA-Project by selecting a random sample of the Maltese population for a pilot-study.

Some smaller tasks included writing a Mumps programme for a reliability-calculation, aiding with coding of underlying cause of death (ICD-9), data checking and so forth.

To conclude, the practical experience was helpful to our training and we are glad that we could have an insight into the problems and challenges a small country is faced with in this very important field of medical science.

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