

## 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, multi-morbidity 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 fulfil the tasks of documentation and information processing in addition to his/her medical work.

Therefore a new profession has been created: Medical Documentalists.

Medical Documentalists are mediators between doctors and computers, and help the medical practitioners in the collection and processing of information.

### Further important tasks are:

- making the medical experience stored in medical records accessible
- the implementation of electronic data processing (EDP) in medicine
- documentary and statistical supervision of therapeutic studies and their evaluation, testing of new drugs
- the retrieval and indexing of literature.

To fulfil 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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### Potential new contraceptive?

Novel ways of keeping us out of the family way know no bounds, according to a conference report published in the *General Practitioner*.

Tests on baboons in the USA have apparently shown that sperms can be immobilised and even electrocuted by means of a 'battery device' surgically inserted in the female cervix. The report, I hasten to add, emphasises that satisfactory results, i.e. no little baboons, were achieved by means of a low current that caused no discomfort to the animals (male, I hope, as well as female).

Dr Stephen Kaali, director of the Women's Medical Pavilion in Dobbs Ferry, NY, who developed the idea, reckons, however, that it will be many years before women can switch themselves on or off to order. A major problem, for example, is that of ensuring bio-compatibility, i.e. preventing rejection or some nasty interaction with body fluids.

Also, how could you ever face the prospect of telling your family that they owed their existence to a dud PP3?