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THE ABSTRACTING ORGANIZATION AS AN INFORMATION SERVICE
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It is hardly possible to speak on this subject without drawing on the actual experience of an existing abstracting organization; fortunately, the Bureau of Hygiene and Tropical Diseases, which it is my privilege to direct, has now a history and experience lasting 40 years, and it is on that experience that my remarks are based.

In the early years of the present century there occurred in the countries round Lake Victoria, and in some of the islands of that enormous African lake, an epidemic of trypanosomiasis of such extent and gravity that the governments of the countries concerned were compelled to adopt drastic measures to control it. This protracted epidemic revealed how comparatively ignorant of the disease the medical and veterinary departments were, and how badly needed was fundamental research. The governments therefore encouraged research, in the field and in laboratories at home. But, as is usual in science, the problems raised excited the interest of research workers in many fields, who reported the results of this work in a wide variety of journals in many countries and languages. The governments therefore also recognized the need for some organization which should collect the available information, and distribute it to research workers throughout the world. To this end an international conference was held, but agreement on the spread of information could not be reached. The British Government, however, was reluctant to let the suggestion die, and therefore created the Sleeping Sickness Bureau, one of whose functions was to publish the Sleeping Sickness Bulletin. This it did from 1908 onwards. This Bulletin contained summary articles, abstracts of published papers, and reviews of books, relating to trypanosomiasis. It was obviously a success, so much so that in 1911 the idea was extended to a similar Kala Azar Bulletin, and in 1912 to a publication which should absorb the other two and deal with all the diseases conventionally known as tropical diseases. The first issue of this Tropical Diseases Bulletin, therefore, was published in November 1912; it has continued to appear each month up to the present time, and is now in its 46th volume. Incidentally, from South Africa, a request came in 1911 for a similar abstracting journal dealing with veterinary matters, and the Bureau published the Tropical Veterinary Bulletin from 1912 to 1930 when the newly founded Imperial Bureau of Animal Health took over this part of the Bureau's work. Besides abstracts grouped according to subjects, the Tropical Diseases Bulletin from time to time contains special articles or critical reviews in which advances in knowledge are summed up in convenient form, by experts in the subjects concerned.

The organization continued to develop in response to requests for further extensions of its scope. In the early days papers on tropical sanitation were noticed,
and soon whole issues of the Tropical Diseases Bulletin were devoted to this subject. In 1921 a separate Sanitation Supplement to the Tropical Diseases Bulletin was issued, and in 1926 this was expanded to a full and separate monthly publication, the Bulletin of Hygiene. This Bulletin contains abstracts and reviews, and special articles, on public health, the social services, infective diseases, industrial diseases, sanitation, water, food and nutrition, and bacteriology. It is now in its 24th volume.

When, in 1938, war with Germany seemed near, the Bureau of Hygiene and Tropical Diseases proposed that in the event of war a bulletin similar to the Bulletin of Hygiene, but dealing with war medicine, should be published. The suggestion was accepted, and in 1940 there appeared the first number of the Bulletin of War Medicine, produced and edited jointly by the Bureau and the Medical Research Council. This was modelled on the Bulletin of Hygiene; it continued to appear for 6 years and it fulfilled its important purpose of conveying information, abstracted from medical journals of many countries, to those who needed it in a time of great emergency.

In addition to these publications, the Bureau of Hygiene and Tropical Diseases has produced from 1931 the series of Supplements to the Tropical Diseases Bulletin which contain synopses of the annual reports of the medical departments of the British Colonies, and the first of a projected series of Review Monographs - in this case on Trypanosomiasis and Tsetse Flies.

Certain other services afforded by the Bureau will bear mention. From 1943 onwards there has been active collaboration between it and the Commonwealth Mycological Institute for the production of the annual Annotated Bibliography of Medical Mycology. Most of the work on this publication, which is in fact a volume of short abstracts, is done by the Director of the Commonwealth Mycological Institute and his staff, and the contribution made by the Bureau of Hygiene and Tropical Diseases consists chiefly in bringing to his notice papers suitable for abstracting, which we meet in our daily scrutiny of medical literature. The Bureau also helps financially. The association has been most friendly and certainly most helpful to us.

For many years the Bureau has supplied the titles of all papers chosen for abstracting in the field of industrial hygiene, to the Director of the Department for Research in Industrial Medicine of the Medical Research Council, who is thus given early information of current work in his subject. The same is true (but more recently) of another Medical Research Council Unit whose field of research bears on subjects within the scope of the Bureau. Again, for many years all the abstracts on leprosy published in the Tropical Diseases Bulletin have been collected and reprinted in a separate booklet twice each year for the benefit of the British Empire Leprosy Relief Association. During the past 10 years a series of annual summaries of the work reported in the Tropical Diseases Bulletin of the previous year, on each of 9 principal tropical diseases, has been prepared, and these reviews have been published seriatim in the Tropical Diseases Bulletin. They are now being translated into French by the staff of the Journal Médicine Tropicale (Marseilles), and, with our willing consent, are being printed in that journal.

Finally, abstracts from our Bulletins are often reprinted, by agreement, in other abstracting journals - for instance Public Health Engineering Abstracts (U.S.A.), the Journal of Industrial Hygiene and Toxicology (U.S.A.), the Veterinary Bulletin (Great Britain) and others. We are very glad that this practice continues, and we occasionally adopt it ourselves when we borrow an abstract from the Review of Applied Entomology or the Journal of the American Medical Association. But we do this with discretion because we know very well that the abstracts written for other journals are intended for their own readers and that they may not always stress just those points
we need for our readers. Rather than borrow the abstracts, therefore, we tend to borrow the original papers and have them abstracted by our own people.

The Bureau has also served, throughout the years of its existence, as a source of information to the multitude of private persons who ask for it either in person or by letter.

In the Bureau the editors of the Bulletins themselves look through the large number of medical journals received, and choose the papers suitable for abstracting. The titles of these papers are sent to the appropriate abstracters, and the abstracts, when received, are edited for accuracy by comparison with the originals, for suitability and style, and for uniformity of conventions. They are then grouped according to subjects, and printed.

The reason why I have related this brief outline of the history of the Bureau, which is one of the oldest medical abstracting services in the world, is that it leads to the points I wish to make. As follows:-

1. An abstracting service should have a clear idea of the needs of the readers of its publications. The Bureau was created to answer a specific need, and each addition to its work has been made as a result of the realization of a need. The Bureau has therefore restricted its activities to certain branches of medicine, but within those fields it has attempted to record the important work published throughout the world. The Bureau has never claimed, or desired, to abstract or record every paper written on its subjects; it has always been selective and has deliberately declined to review papers of doubtful value. Moreover, the Bureau has attempted to provide the kind of abstracts its readers need, realizing that many of them can hardly hope to consult the original papers.

2. Abstracts should faithfully reflect the sense of the original papers, and should be correct in detail. The selection of points for mention in an abstract is, in our opinion, most efficiently done by an abstracter who is himself versed in the work reported, and the Bureau has always obtained the services of men and women of high scientific attainments for this work. Critical comments on the work recorded, when made by such abstracters, are often of the greatest value, and are encouraged by the Bureau. It has been our experience that abstracters rarely make comments or criticisms unless these are obviously justified, and that the criticisms are not trivial. Abstracters of high scientific standing are well aware of the dangers inherent in criticism, especially the danger of over-stressing a debatable opinion, and they are usually scrupulous to give an author his due. The readers, of course, are usually competent to assess the merits of criticism, and glad of the opportunity to do so.

3. Abstracts can never be completely up to date, and accuracy rather than promptness should always be a first consideration; but it is also the function of an abstracting service, if it is to have lasting value, to cover its field adequately and continuously. A reader who wishes to inform himself on any subject covered by the abstracting journal should be confident that he will be able to find an account of previous substantial work on that subject in the earlier issues of the journal, and that later work will be abstracted in future issues. This does not mean that an abstracting service should not embark on new subjects, but it does mean that the editor must be alert to sense those subjects which promise fruitful development. Continuity of interest entails continuity of editing. It is the function of the editor to choose the material, and if this is not done with care and attention, the service will suffer.

4. At the Bureau we attempt, in presenting the material, to adopt a style which
will create and maintain interest. We deprecate too telegraphic a style, and we do not aim to provide merely a title and a few notes to indicate the contents of the paper. We do not want our abstracts to be merely library tools to be looked up on special occasions, but rather to invite reading because of their own intrinsic interest, as literature to which people will turn for the pleasure of keeping themselves informed, even on subjects not particularly their own.