

MLA '04: Seize the Power! Washington DC 21st-26th May 2004
<http://www.mlanet.org/am/am2004/index.html>

Open access seized delegates' imaginations at MLA 04, which I attended in late May. The Medical Library Association has a membership of more than 1,100 institutional and 3,600 individual members and their annual meeting attracts some 2,500 delegates; contrast this with the UK equivalent, CILIP's Health Libraries Group which musters around a tenth of that number for its (excellent) conferences. I am very grateful to University of Sussex Library and BSMS for their support which allowed me to go to the largest gathering of medical librarians in the world. There's much to learn from North America; in spite of differences in health, higher education and library structures and systems, they are grappling with precisely the same questions as we are.

In her presidential address, Pat L Thibodeau, the retiring President, emphasised MLA's international focus, in particular their commitment to working with IFLA and EAHIL, and drew the conference's attention to MLA's record of work on behalf of medical librarians, including contributions to the debate on the future of scholarly communication, (MLA were signatories to a submission to the UK House of Commons Science and Technology Committee Inquiry into Scientific Publications), their work on information literacy and their impressive lobbying programme (they used the fact that they were in the nation's capital for a lobbying afternoon when they descended on Capitol Hill en masse). The incoming President, Joanne Marshall, is equally committed to these goals and is a good friend of British medical libraries.

Other set pieces include the Janet Doe lecture, named after the doyenne of US medical librarianship, founding editor of the medical librarian's sacred text, the *Handbook of Medical Library Practice*. Rick Forsman of Colorado, this year's lecturer, spoke on *Life and Death on the Coral Reef: an ecological perspective on scholarly publishing in the health sciences*. A diver with an interest in marine ecology, his metaphor was rather forced from time to time, but no one could argue with his conclusions, to wit that librarians should inform themselves about open access, talk to others (eg authors, publishers and readers), reject over-simplifications of the difficulties in new models of publishing, persuade and respect others and pursue simultaneously principles and concrete outcomes.

The other two plenary events were the Joseph P McGovern lecture, given by Harm J. de Blij on *Geographic illiteracy and national security*. Though his main theme was the shocking neglect of geography in US education and the unbelievable ignorance of senior politicians which has contributed to some of the USA's foreign policy blunders, de Blij mentioned the links between geography and health, citing the renowned study by John Snow who used maps to show how cholera spread in London through a contaminated pump in Covent Garden, John Hunter in West Africa in the 1960s who studied onchocerciasis (river blindness), and the work on the epidemiology of HIV/AIDS in the 1980s by Peter Gould.

The introduction to the *Morning of innovation* was given by Ray Kurzweil, inventor of the Kurzweil reader for the blind. He gave some predictions about health technology for the next thirty years. Some of the things he's working on (including Ramona, an avatar) can be seen at: <http://www.kurzweilai.net/>

The normally dull business meeting was enlivened by a debate on a motion from Wayne Peay of Utah, who proposed that "the Medical Library Association will cease to accept funding from publishers who do not support open access". Wayne took this extreme

position to get the debate started, and was quite content when the matter was referred to the MLA Executive Board for urgent action; they undertook to report back in September. The US are ahead of us: their journal, the *Journal of the Medical Library Association* is available in open access mode through PubMed Central:

<http://www.pubmedcentral.nih.gov/> and one of my post-conference tasks is to look at how we might turn the British equivalent, *Health Information & Libraries Journal* to open access.

The rest of the program is divided up between MLA sections, which means choices about which stream to attend. Sections collaborate to hold sessions on questions of common interest. I went to one on *Educating the 21st century health professional*, where four different presentations described web-based learning projects, for students, for primary care physicians (GPs in UK English) and for public health staff.

Another was *Power Partners: what medical informatics can do for medical librarians and what librarians can do for informatics*. One speaker tried to define the differences in approach between informaticians and librarians, an interesting exercise, but ended up saying that he thought this more of a job for an anthropologist than anyone else. I also attended one on *Emerging infectious and zoonotic disease: the power of disease on society*. There was a fascinating paper on how a Sydney hospital had coped with the information challenges of the SARS outbreak by building intranet access to the evidence, one on how to rediscover the literature of re-emerging diseases (in this case anthrax, botulism, plague, smallpox and tularaemia, which rang bells for me because of our experience in rediscovering the literature on foot and mouth disease during the UK outbreak of 2001) and one on building a data base of animal sentinel literature (the canary in the mine principle).

There is a lavish exhibition, with many exhibitors' names familiar to the British delegate, though the faces at the booths are different and numerous opportunities to meet and network including an international visitors' reception and parties hosted by suppliers. But the finest was an impromptu performance by the Bearded Pigs, a band who only play together at conferences and whose august line-up includes Britain's own Bruce Madge, CILIP councillor and Research Manager at the National Patient Safety Agency, on lead guitar.

On the final day, I also visited the National Library of Medicine at Bethesda Maryland, a short metro ride from DC. The largest medical library in the world, NLM is the holy of holies for me, and excellent guides showed us the contemporary and the historical collections, as well as its cold-war architecture. I was there during a heat wave, with temperatures in the 90s and high humidity and enjoyed the plague of periodical cicadas which hatch every seventeen years.

I kept up a conference blog during my visit, which you can see at http://tomroper.typepad.com/tr/mla_2004/index.html and which may add some colour and detail to these notes.

Tom Roper
Information Resources Development Coordinator