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## Saving lives through health information; African leadership and partnership

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**Abstract:** Reliable and timely health information saves lives. Health librarians are crucial to providing access and their effectiveness is enhanced by networks and partnerships. Demonstrable benefits are emerging through a tried and tested model for leadership and partnership working. Longstanding relationships between three pan African bodies *Association for Health Information and Libraries in Africa (AHILA)*, the *Information Training & Outreach Centre for Africa (ITOCA)* and *Partnerships in Health Information (Phi)* have become more strategic through Phi promoting African leadership as a key strand of its strategy and through the partners formalising their partnership.

ITOCA, whose established role in capacity building is well respected in the profession, and AHILA whose professional development and advocacy work culminates in biennial congresses bringing together health information professionals to share and learn from one another, and Phi have strengthened their alliance and enhanced their impact through working more closely together under Memorandum of Understanding agreements signed in October 2011. A member of ITOCA staff now serves as Phi coordinator for Africa; and as AHILA coordinator, providing a much needed secretariat to support AHILA Executive. This alliance is paying dividends in enabling easy and speedy communication and collaborative working across all three partners, whose combined networks provide a unique source of knowledge and expertise. Two examples, both with roots in IFLA initiatives, demonstrate the need for such a model and the gaps the partnership works to address. In October 2012 an African led workshop 'Public Access to Health Information (PAHI); training for Trainers' sponsored by Phi and AHILA and supported by ITOCA, was held at the AHILA Conference in Cape Verde. In November 2012 a week- long workshop on resource management was held in Lusaka coordinated by Phi and delivered by ITOCA. On the final day, the President of AHILA played a key role, and an adaptation of the IFLA *Building Strong Library Associations* workshop was held at which the Zambian chapter of AHILA was revitalized.

## **1. Introduction**

Information for health care and research can save lives and prevent suffering. Improving the distribution of timely, relevant and appropriate information in Africa is thus a necessary foundation for improving people's health. Ill health can lead to economic problems if the breadwinner cannot work, it is a contributor to poverty.

Local health information professionals are key to the creation of new and innovative ways of making appropriate information available for: the initial training of doctors, nurses and all healthcare workers, their continuing education, improved patient care, and outreach initiatives to enable community members to make informed decisions about their health and the health of those they care for.

## **2. Background**

Networking and partnerships are vital when resources are limited. Partnerships are intended for joint solving of problems, resource exchange, cooperation, coordination and coalition building. Partnerships also assist to create opportunities for the people the partners support and often enhance the impact of each other's' initiatives.

It is with this in mind that a two year Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) was agreed in 2011 between AHILA, ITOCA and Phi and initiated in January 2012. The longstanding relationships across the three have been becoming increasingly strategic and mutually beneficial. For example Phi, which is a UK based charity with over 20 years' experience promoting health information through libraries in Africa, promotes African leadership as a key strand of its strategy and even more has been achieved through the partners formalising their partnership. ITOCA, whose established role in training is well respected, and AHILA whose professional development and advocacy work culminates in biennial congresses bringing together health information professionals to share and learn from one another, and Phi have strengthened their alliance and enhanced their impact through working more closely together under MoUs. The occasion of the African Library Summit in Pretoria, attended by all the three partner organisations provided an opportunity for the first formal review of the MoUs. The success of the initiative has exceeded expectations and as a result the partners agreed to move the MoUs to an annual rolling basis, subject to funding.

The signing of the MoUs enabled the appointment of a Phi Coordinator (Africa Office) based in South Africa. The same officer provides AHILA with a Secretariat.



MoU signing, December 2011. Gracian Chimwaza and Blessing Chataira, ITOCA



MoU signing, December 2011. Shane Godbolt and Nick Naftalin, Phi



Through the MoUs a coordinator for AHILA Chipo Msengezi (left), who also manages Phi's Africa office, is hosted by ITOCA

We are proving that synergies are created through the respective roles and shared vision of the three partner organisations with AHILA leading in promoting access and use of health information; ITOCA building capacity for using knowledge systems amongst the research and education communities and Phi promoting African leadership in improving the flow of health information. We can

see that demonstrable benefits are emerging through the tried and tested model of partnership working we have established through the MoUs.

### **3. What we've achieved together**

The alliance is paying dividends in enabling easy and speedy communication and collaborative working across all three partners, whose combined networks provide a unique source of knowledge and expertise. An example of this relating to the role of librarians in improving public access to health information is

#### **3.1 Public Access to Health Information (PAHI) workshop in Cape Verde October 2012**

This African led workshop was held in October 2012 in Cape Verde at the 13th Biennial Congress and General Assembly of AHILA. The workshop was sponsored and coordinated by Phi & AHILA and supported by ITOCA.

Drawing on materials developed by IFLA/FAIFE and refined through workshops delivered in seven African countries the PAHI workshop was offered as part of implementing AHILA strategy in this important area of activity for all health librarians, other librarians and their partners.

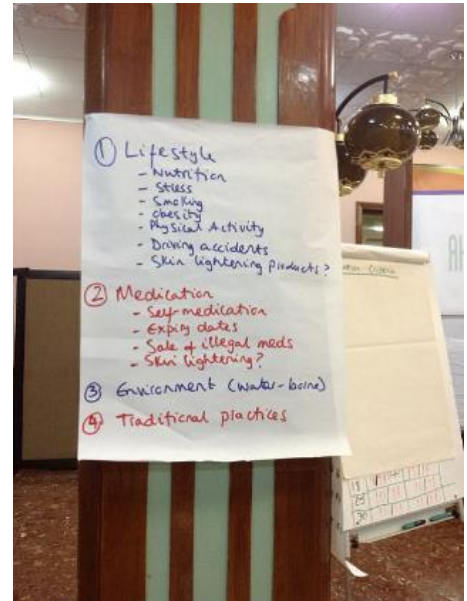
The main aim of the PAHI workshop was to discuss what librarians can do, especially through partnership, to improve public access to health information and objectives included:

- Brainstorming the health issues where libraries/ librarians from all sectors, especially health, can make a difference
- Drawing on skills, knowledge and expertise of workshop participants in the specific area of public access to health information & mapping what is already being done
- Sharing ideas and learning from each other about how librarians can increase their contribution in partnerships to improve public access to health information



Delegates at work during sessions

*Right-* Feedback from the plenary discussion on the top health issues in Africa which librarians can make a difference



The workshop was facilitated in 3 languages (English, French and Portuguese) by African information specialists. By the end of the workshop participants had an opportunity to understand the role of partnership in improving public access to health information.

Another example of the collaborative working of AHILA, ITOCA and Phi is

### **3.2 Strengthening resource management workshop, Lusaka November 2012**

This week long workshop on Resource Management was held in Lusaka, Zambia under the auspices of the Tropical Health & Education Trust (THET) the UK support organisation for Health Links between health institutions in Africa, Asia and elsewhere in the world, and their counterparts in the UK. The workshop was coordinated by Phi and delivered by ITOCA. On the final day, the President of AHILA, Nasra Gathoni played a key role, and an adaptation of the IFLA *Building Strong Library Associations* workshop was held at which the Zambian chapter of AHILA was revitalized.

The workshop was titled “Strengthening Resource Management in THET-Supported Schools of Nursing”. The intervention involved standard setting in select rural Schools of Nursing (SoNs). Good practice in managing resources is important for improving health in Zambia and a coordinated and planned approach is essential for the most effective use of scarce resources.

Good practice and standards in terms of library and information services mean that users will have access to good quality, relevant, evidence based information, to skilled and motivated librarians and to a range of services enabling them to meet education, training, professional practice and public/community needs which improve health in Zambia.

Other partners included the University of Zambia (UNZA) providing local expertise and the charity Teaching Aids at Low Cost (TALC), who sponsored the representatives of the five participating Schools of Nursing to select core materials for their libraries. The selections were made during the workshop and then shipped to Lusaka by TALC.

One of the recommendations from the workshop was that focused leadership and coordination should be developed to create and sustain a consortium of health information libraries, librarians and health information users in Zambia (as part of the broader organisation AHILA). As a result an interim Steering Committee for the Zambian Chapter of AHILA, to be known as ZAHILA was set up. There is now for the first time in Zambia a professional body on health information.



**Group photo of the delegates**



**Lead facilitator Blessing Chataira with participants during a session**



**Nasra Gathoni, President, AHILA speaking to the participants**



**Presentation of certificates by Mrs Mirabo, Chief Nurse Education Officer at the MoH and Ms Nasra Gathoni, President, AHILA**

Below is a quote from a Zambian Ministry of Health official after the successful workshop.

*"I wish to urge you... not to shelve the skills that have been imparted to you but to use [them] to improve your libraries & information centres. Collaboration with other resource managers will help improve the provision of your services ...."* Mrs Mirabo, Chief Nurse Education Officer, MoH Zambia.

#### **4. Key priorities**

Promoting African leadership on health information issues by working with ITOCA, AHILA and other partners to strengthen the key role that librarians and library networks can play in improving public access to information are key priorities for Phi.

Building on its successful biennial programme of Congresses to strengthen existing and create new country chapters of AHILA, thus creating professional bodies at country level with whom to work with in health information underpins AHILA's strategic plan 2010 – 2015 <http://www.ahila.org/images/stories/ahila-strategic-plan.pdf> and is a key task.

As a capacity building organization aimed at enhancing information and communications technology (ICT) skills for African librarians, information specialists, scientists, researchers and students in Sub-Saharan Africa ITOCA's priority is to respond to the growing needs for training and capacity building from this community by expanding and diversifying its current portfolio.

As partner organisations we gain added value from working together and intend to carry on strengthening our partnership and working towards our shared vision, that of promoting access to and use of reliable health information in Africa.

#### **5. Conclusion**

We believe that significant benefits have emerged already, demonstrated by the two examples outlined in this paper.

In Professor Sir Muir Gray's words "The most valuable resource in any library is the librarian, but they can be even more valuable outside the library." Reliable and timely health information saves lives. Health information librarians play a crucial role in providing information access and training and we are proud to be working together.

This partnership model for leadership and networking, established for the ultimate benefit for users, brings out important lessons worth sharing and replicating in other aspects of knowledge sharing and related disciplines.