

St. Louis Medical Librarians 50 Years of Organizational History (1960-2010)

The St. Louis Medical Librarians group (SLML) was first conceived in late 1959 primarily through the leadership of three local medical librarians: Margaret M. DeLisle (St. Louis Medical Society), Marqua Weathers (Washington University School of Medicine) and George Yashur (Saint Louis University School of Medicine). The inaugural meeting was held in 1960 at the John J. Cochran Veterans Administration Hospital and initial attendance represented a wide range of area medical libraries.

These dedicated librarians founded the organization to foster professional collegiality, improve the practice and impact of medical librarianship, and benefit all participants through informed discussion and sharing solutions to mutual problems. These goals have occasionally shifted in emphasis throughout the organization's fifty years but have remained continually active. Unfortunately many significant documents from the group's first three years (1960-1963) were inadvertently lost after the untimely death of the officer holding them. There are also a few gaps in membership rosters and other items for subsequent years, but on the whole the organization has maintained a commendable commitment to preserving its records.

The earliest membership roster, dated November 1960, lists 45 names from at least 28 different institutions, including a broad range of academic, hospital, and corporate libraries in the greater St. Louis Metropolitan area, including adjoining areas of Illinois. This quick growth clearly demonstrates the value that medical librarians felt such an organization could provide, and a sizeable number of charter and other early members remained very active within the group for the remainder of their local careers.

In September of 1961, the Chairman, Francis O'Leary, wrote to the Regional Group Liaison Officer of the Medical Library Association inquiring about requirements for affiliation with the national organization. He stated that: "The group consists of some 25-30 individuals with and without professional training, working in nursing, pharmaceutical, hospital and medical school libraries. We are determined to use the group as a professional forum and as a meeting place to develop professional relationships." A month later, Mr. O'Leary invited even more local librarians in health-related settings to attend a meeting and consider membership.

Although the organization was not officially formalized and the first bylaws were not drafted or adopted until 1969, archival materials use the name "St. Louis Medical Librarians" as early as January 1961. Apparently the original plan was for nine programs annually; in July 1962 the organization decided to reduce that number to five, which has continued to this day. Additional meetings have been held under special circumstances to address critical issues of the times. Meeting locations have rotated widely among the group, with efforts made to accommodate both the needs of the program content and the convenience of the majority. Through the ensuing years, many different members have generously hosted business, general, social and/or continuing education meetings at their various institutions of employment.

Providing access to printed journals was a key concern of 20th-century medical librarians. The group quickly realized that members could benefit from re-distributing unwanted volumes and duplicate issues. A newsletter from 1964 encouraged exchange of journal want lists and surplus journals lists during meetings; this activity continued for many years.

By 1967, it was proposed that the St. Louis Medical Librarians be formed into an official structured entity. On Jan. 25th, 1967, a business meeting was held at St. Louis College of Pharmacy, where Helen Silverman spoke “on the proposed ‘St. Louis Medical Library Association’.”

And the 1966/67 annual report of the Missouri Institute of Psychiatry states:

“Recognizing the growing need for area-wide cooperation to deal with mounting pressures of limited budgets, the shortage of trained personnel, and increasing demands on existing facilities, heads of the medial libraries in the area met to consider the formation of a St. Louis Medical Library Association. This Association would provide a mechanism through which libraries in the area could work toward organizing and funding cooperative projects which no one library alone could afford to develop. Mrs. [Nina] Matheson was elected president of this group.”

The newly formalized organization did not yet have a broad basis of membership support. A short history that was presented at a meeting on April 26, 1976 stated that in 1968, only 10 people regularly attended. However, the group quickly expanded as it proved its value for participating members. A significant example of a productive meeting occurred in Nov. 1969, when Miss Virginia Algermissen, Assistant Professor in the School of Library Information Science, Columbia, MO, conducted a Medlars workshop. The St. Louis Medical Librarians paid her transportation and expenses.

During 1969 a committee drafted a set of by-laws to state the association’s objectives and develop stronger guidelines, thus allowing more organizational stability. These first by-laws were adopted in the spring of 1970, under the name of the St. Louis Medical Librarians. The by-laws specified that there would be two officers, President (replacing the earlier title of Chairman that was used in meeting and program announcements since at least 1962) and Secretary/Treasurer, and two members-at-large. Five meetings were mandated per year, with the last being the annual business meeting. These meetings usually began at 2 p.m. with a short business meeting followed by a program that ended around 5 p.m., most often on a Tuesday or Wednesday.

The technological revolution was in its infancy at this time, but its tremendous impact on libraries was already looming over the library profession. The generally progressive members of the St. Louis Medical Librarians were very interested in becoming better informed. The subject of the April, 1970 meeting was the applications of data processing to medical libraries, and the September program was simply titled “library technology.” Providing a forum for learning and discussion on such timely topics encouraged increased membership. By August of 1970, the reigning President noted that the “organization has 67 members representing all the medical libraries in the metropolitan area. Generally, about one-third of our membership attend each meeting.” After the meetings, collegiality was promoted by serving coffee.

Membership in the St. Louis Medical Librarians was also extended to related and supportive businesses. Mr. Donald Huntze of University Bindery hosted a tour of his premises as the November 1970 meeting. Mr. George P. Oberest at Matthews Book Company did the same in December 1971. The March 1972 program took place at Central Microfilms. Peterson Business Systems provided hospitality for holiday parties and other events during the 1980's.

As the 20th century entered its last quarter, broad cultural and social changes were taking place. These are reflected in small ways in the archival papers of the organization. For example, besides the growing interest in technology, beginning in 1972 there is a noticeable decline in the usage of formal conventional prefixes such as "Mrs." when referring to specific individuals. By 1975, only earned titles such as "Dr." were generally retained.

Another sign of the times was the need to increase membership dues. The organization had assessed affordable dues of only \$1. In the early years this covered at least the expense of printing and mailing regular newsletters and announcements. In 1975, annual dues were doubled to \$2.

Program planning was intentionally diverse. In the words of Susan Yunis, President for 1972/73, "The group is largely hospital librarians, along with a significant number of university medical center librarians. The differences between the two are great, making programs of interest to both difficult to devise." She also noted that the group had an increased awareness of its role in continuing education, since the Bi-State Regional Medical Program library network (which had previously supported this) was dissolving.

During her tenure, there was at least one large-scale issue of importance to all. That was the Williams and Wilkins copyright suit against the National Library of Medicine which was pending in 1972. This controversy over the legality of copying periodical literature for researcher and inter-library loan use affected all types of medical libraries. The St. Louis Medical Librarians invited Dr. Estelle Brodman to speak on this topic; she had given a similar program to the Special Library Association. Originally scheduled for December 1972, cancelled due to bad weather and rescheduled by popular demand, the program finally took place in April 1973. (The Supreme Court settled the lawsuit in a 1975 split decision that affirmed the library's actions as "fair use;" this case influenced the copyright law enacted in 1976).

Besides continuing education and social benefits, another role that the St. Louis Medical Librarians organization filled for many years was efficient and economical coordination between local medical libraries in sharing their journals. Members were always encouraged to submit lists of duplicate journals that they were willing to donate to other libraries. To facilitate effective local inter-library loan activity, the Committee on Interlibrary Loan Cooperation (Cynthia Fedders, Alice Brand, and Sandra Hudson) produced the *Union List of Serials in the St. Louis Metropolitan Area*; 60 copies were printed and sold for \$2 in 1974. This committee also addressed the problem of varying interlibrary loan policies, by collecting member policies and statistics of ILL requests.

Then the National Library of Medicine discontinued subsidizing inter-library loans. A fee schedule was announced, beginning in 1976/77 with \$1, and increasing annually to \$3 in 1978/79. This created much angst among the SLML membership, quickly leading to action.

The St. Louis Medical Librarians turned the crisis into an opportunity to assess and improve their organization. 36 people attended a special meeting in December of 1975 “to examine the current position of the SLMLA and potential roles the organization might assume to benefit its membership” – in particular, “to discuss the directions future document delivery might take in the Greater St. Louis area in view of the Midcontinental Regional Medical Library’s upcoming charges for interlibrary loan activity.”

Dr. Brodman asked to be the keynote speaker to explain the rationale for NLM’s policy change and make suggestions for implementation of a modified ILL system. Dr. Brodman identified six broad areas of importance for the St. Louis Medical Librarians:

- 1) Educational offerings
- 2) Consortia
- 3) Cooperative acquisition
- 4) Cooperative storage
- 5) Interlibrary loan ventures
- 6) Messenger service

A follow-up meeting was held in March, 1976 “to analyze possible directions, review priorities identified ..., review area interlibrary loan statistics.” Utilizing their *Union List of Serials in the St. Louis Metropolitan Area*, SLML libraries minimized ILL costs by borrowing as much as possible from within the local medical library community.

The increased emphasis on cooperative activities highlighted a need for improved communication. There had been at least one early newsletter (1962/63) but apparently none were produced from 1964 through 1975. In 1976, Don Huntze of University Bindery offered to print a SLMLA newsletter, defraying much of the cost through advertising his company. The April 1976 newsletter declares itself as the “First Issue” and is numbered vol. 1 no. 1. Its leading article discusses the NLM copyright issue. Newsletters were printed regularly during 1976 through 1997, although the archives have several gaps in the holdings for those years.

In the spring of 1976, the by-laws were re-evaluated; there was some concern regarding organizational discontinuity as officers inevitably changed. The group also decided that it needed a logo. The archived documents from this era reveal the recognition that a certain degree of maturity had been achieved, and a sense that the earlier years needed to be remembered and preserved. Jane Whalen, a founding member, created a brief history of the St. Louis Medical Librarians which she presented at the April meeting. Highlights of her remarks include:

1. The St. Louis Medical Librarians were originally organized as an informal group, meeting regularly to exchange information and develop social as well as professional relationships. They still operate on the same premise of sharing knowledge, problems and resources.
2. Stated organizational objectives are: to develop a spirit of cooperation, provide programs that interest and assist, improve library service, provide an opportunity for professional growth, cooperate with other organizations having similar interests.

3. Membership is open to anyone in medical or allied scientific libraries who pay their \$2 annual dues. In 1976 membership was about 60 people, most from hospital libraries, others from medical center libraries, the St. Louis Medical Society and the special subject libraries (chiropractic, osteopathy, optometry, pharmacology, psychoanalysis, psychiatry and orthodontia).
4. Bylaws provided for an executive board, a program chairperson and a membership chairperson. Bylaws also require meeting 5 times between Sept. and June, with the last meeting being the annual business meeting.
5. Programs have included: clinical pharmacist and drug information, budgeting for hospital libraries, data processing in the library, microfilm and microfiche for the medical librarian, hospital consortia, and Medline.
6. Major initiatives of the organization have been: Union List of Serials to spur ILL among smaller libraries; discussion of challenge from reduced budgets and need to expand services, esp. with ILL from the medical library network no longer free; exploring other potential areas of cooperation; continuing education esp. as computers increase the ability and speed to obtain information; education with goal of local academic institutions offering courses in librarianship, esp. medical librarianship, on all levels (undergrad thru post grad).

Having taken the time to consider its past history, the St. Louis Medical Librarians forged ahead toward its future. In September of 1976, a revision of the organizational bylaws was proposed, and a committee was formed for that task. A private letter in October from that year's President, Judith Messerle, to another member of the board gives insight into the continual effort to engage and energize the general membership. Messerle's thoughts regarding what works and what doesn't for the group are timeless. She notes that motivation requires inclusion, consortia formation failed because no one would lead it and its advantages were difficult to itemize, and that the membership committee was very effective. In the November newsletter, she passes on a comment from an anonymous member that the meetings involved too much talk and insufficient action; she asks other members for directional comments and greater participation.

Another special meeting was held in December, 1976. At this time SLML defined education as a priority for both trained and untrained health science library personnel. As result, a committee for educational programs was appointed.

By October 1977, the St. Louis Medical Librarians were beginning preparations for "Project 80," the joint meeting of the Midwest and MidContinental Regional Medical Library Groups to be held in St. Louis in 1980. A planning committee was formed, co-chaired by Judy Messerle and Audrey Powderly. The group had much talent to draw from, with over 100 registered (and paid-up) members on the roster by early 1978.

At the end of that fiscal year, dues were increased from \$2 to \$3 in order to generate a contingency fund for Project 80, as well as for operating expenses. It was also noted that the *Union List of Serials* included 33 area medical libraries, and that the first SLML-sponsored MLA CE course was held on May 24, 1978.

The second continuing education course was sponsored the following year. A listing of programs during 1978/79 serve as typical examples of the diverse topics the organization always offered: library services for the handicapped, a tour of Ralston Purina, discussion of the ethical limitations of human research, online bibliographic searching, and a tour of the American Optometric Association Library.

By April, 1979, "Update: Skills for the 80's" had been selected as the theme for Project 80. Membership had risen to 111 people. Catalogers were dealing with the introduction of new standardized rules (AACRII) and a St. Louis Online Users Group was being formed. Dues were raised again, to \$5, and the idea of separating the offices of secretary and treasurer was under discussion.

During the next year, Project 80 took shape through the efforts of many volunteers. The two regional library groups each gave \$500 toward conference expenses, and the St. Louis Medical Librarians advanced \$300 for the purpose (from their assets of approximately \$450). A separate bank account was opened for Project 80 to keep its transactions distinct from routine organizational business. And Jane Whalen observed that SLML had reached its 20th anniversary.

Although Project 80 dominated most activities of 1980, other subjects were also mentioned. Saundra Hudson reported that the Missouri State Library Network's first recommendation was to use OCLC and other MARC format data bases as source of records to begin a statewide data base. Sr. Bernice Seger noted that their union list of serials was getting outdated. A newsletter item about the retirement of Harriet Steurnagel reported the interesting fact that she had been a local soloist ballerina and tap dancer before attending college and becoming a dental librarian. Project 80, however, was clearly the most significant event of that year.

Held Oct. 1-4, 1980 at the Chase-Park Plaza Hotel in St. Louis, the bi-regional conference "Update: Skills for the 80's" was highly successful and drew a total registration of 272 attendees. The keynote speaker was Nina Matheson, Director of the Paul Himmelfarb Health Science Library of the George Washington University Medical Center, and a former SLML member who had served as the group's first formal President in 1967. The topic of her speech was communication and technology in the 1980's. This theme was expanded upon by several other program presenters.

By the spring of 1981, the St. Louis Medical Librarians were able to focus again on internal matters. In March, the By-Laws committee recommended the creation of a new office, President-elect, and the separation of Secretary/Treasurer into two offices. The election procedure was redesigned to be more flexible in order to allow more candidate nominations. These revisions were accepted by the general membership in April.

The following years did not involve any major events or special challenges. Programs were offered regarding online searching, health care trends, and other emerging issues. Perhaps because there were no galvanizing topics, participation in continuing education classes was sometimes insufficient and several classes were cancelled due to low enrollment. Another bylaws revision was needed in 1992 for the organization to apply for tax-exempt status. This required a plan in the event of dissolution; it was decided that any tangible assets shall go to the

St. Louis Society for Medical and Scientific Education, a division of the St. Louis Metropolitan Medical Society.

Another noteworthy occurrence in 1982 was the development of the St. Louis Medical Librarians computer-generated union list of serials. This was a cooperative venture by SLML, Washington University Medical School Library and the OCTANET interlibrary loan system. The use of computers for library-related tasks was steadily becoming more prevalent. For example, the September, 1982, program concerned “minicomputers in the library.”

The financial and economic environment was changing also. Membership dues increased from \$5 to \$10 for 1983/84. And pricing for OCTANET was restructured since NLM would no longer subsidize it.

In 1983 the St. Louis Medical Librarians were once again asked to host an upcoming MCMLA regional meeting. Unlike 1980, which was a joint meeting of two adjacent regions, the 1985 MCMLA conference was limited to the Midcontinental regional affiliates. Its theme was “Gateways” and it was held Oct. 1-4, 1985 at Washington University and attracted 126 registrants.

Cooperation continued to be critical to the St. Louis Medical Librarians. OCTANET, the interlibrary loan mechanism of the Regional Medical Libraries, was replaced with the automated DOCLINE system in 1987. As a result, the cost and labor of interlibrary loan increased for member libraries. They decided to use a new local PHILNET system for its primary ILL service, and to only access DOCLINE for items that weren’t available from the local community. In 1987, there were 8 PHILSOM libraries and 31 non-PHILSOM libraries in the SLML serials holdings.

The leadership structure of the St. Louis Medical Librarians had gradually expanded, and by 1986 there were 14 distinct leadership offices. The proportion of leaders to the general membership was relatively high, since total membership had declined slightly from over 100 to around 80, representing more than 50 area libraries. At least five programs were arranged each year, and the 1987 SLML Serials Holdings list sold 61 copies with advertising allowing a small profit.

Strategic Planning became a hot topic in the late 1980’s. In May of 1988 the Strategic Planning Committee surveyed the SLML membership and discussed the results in early 1989. The resultant strategic plan was approved in June 1989 implemented in the 1989/90 fiscal year. That year was particularly busy, with 14 different committees working, and 14 programs and meetings held. The 1989/90 Action Plan was created to recognize leadership and outstanding service. Coming up with program ideas and keeping contact with other local, regional and national librarian groups were ongoing issues.

Several influential figures left the SLML stage in 1989/90. Don Huntze, owner of University Bindery, died after a lengthy illness. And Judy Messerle, Director of the Saint Louis University Medical Center Library and a former SLML President, moved on to become the Director of the Harvard School of Medicine libraries.

Looking ahead, the group learned that St. Louis would once again be the site for an MCMLA meeting in 1992. Looking back, 1990 was recognized as the 30th anniversary of

SLML, and charter member Jane Whalen wrote “A Bit of History” to give background and historical perspective in the November 1989 newsletter. Saundra Brenner further emphasized this milestone in her President’s Update of March 1990. This occasion caused the group to consider greater stability for its archival records. Washington University Medical Library agreed to house the SLML archives within its special collections area. It was later noted that there were several large gaps in the organization’s official records, particularly from 1975-1979, and that many membership rosters were missing from the 1960’s and 1980’s. Members were asked to donate any of these materials that they might have in their personal possession.

The following year, 2 CE’s and a state-wide meeting in Columbia held in conjunction with the Kansas City area medical librarians were among the 8 programs held. And the SLML created a constitution which was amended and approved.

Plans for the 1992 regional meeting were well underway by 1991. As with the 1980 meeting, this conference included both the Midwest and the Midcontinental Regional Medical Library associations. The SLML chose the slogan “Discovery ‘92” to play off the 500th anniversary of Columbus’ discovery of America. The meeting was held Sept. 30-Oct. 3, 1992 at the Marriott Pavilion downtown hotel. Discovery ’92 was a resounding success; 440 people were registered, and SLML received \$8,000 in profit.

Membership in the SLML had built back up to around the 100-member mark. In 1993, the membership committee suggested granting “emeritus” status for retired members, including Harriet Steuernagel, Jane Whalen, Mary Sicking, and Helen Henderson.

In 1996, the organization faced a need for redefinition and for updated strategic planning. The healthcare environment was changing rapidly, and electronic information was becoming increasingly important. As the Internet became pervasive, it was also time to create an online presence for the group. Russ Monika presented a proposed home page layout early in 1996.

But 1996 also demanded planning for yet another MCMLA meeting, as St. Louis was the site selected for the 1997 conference. The “TEAM MCMLA ’97” meeting was held Sept. 23-30 at the Holiday Inn Clayton, with 126 registered attendees.

SLML had both a fully functional website and an electronic discussion list operating by the fall of 1999. Despite some variation in members’ initial online expertise, these were well accepted and soon became the primary means of disseminating organizational communication. Ten years later, because of the unexpected death of webmaster Russ Monika, the website was redesigned and simplified for easier maintenance by less technically-inclined members.

The St. Louis Medical Librarians served once again as hosts for the MCMLA annual meeting in 2006. Building upon previous themes, “Gateway to Re-Discovery” had 137 registered attendees. It was held Oct. 10-13, 2006, at the Crowne Plaza in Clayton.

Strategic planning continued as an ongoing activity, although it held more prominence during some years than in others. It received significant attention in 2008/09. A membership survey was developed and made available online in the spring of 2008. Respondents indicated that they were interested in continuing education offerings, particularly on advanced topics, with time for informal networking included in the schedule. Social hours and entertainment-only meetings also had significant appeal. Cultivating new leadership in SLML was another area that

the survey addressed. The recommendation was that new members be recognized and particularly encouraged to participate, and that all members be personally contacted and invited to serve on committees. The value of the listserv as a communication tool was affirmed. Responses were mixed on the importance of an online newsletter, but in view of the effort required to produce one, the survey committee recommended keeping the website current and including pictures of SLML activities as an alternative.

An open meeting was held in November 2008 to review and to discuss the survey results and to suggest other changes that SLML might make to accommodate the needs and expectations of its members. A similar “brainstorming” meeting in November 2009 continued the concept and is expected to remain an annual tradition. This willingness to consider change while retaining the core goals of professional and personal support for the mutual benefit of its various members is an essential characteristic of the St. Louis Medical Librarians, and the central reason why it has remained a vibrant, viable and productive organization for fifty years.

Prepared by Marysue Schaffer, June 2010.