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Libraries Saving Lives in Iraq

The need for medical information in Iraq is extreme, but some U.S. institutions are helping out **by Michal Strutin**

In January 2001, 10 physicians from northern Iraq visited Quillen College of Medicine on the campus of East Tennessee State University in Johnson City. The medical school, nestled in a valley among the tree-cloaked slopes of the Appalachians, saw a common bond: Quillen and northern Iraq's three medical schools all specialize in rural medicine in mountain towns and hamlets.

The visit had been arranged by the nonprofit Meridian International Center, which was under contract with the U.S. State Department to help medical schools in northern Iraq. In 2002, the State Department awarded ETSU the job of helping rebuild medical schools in the northern, relatively calm, Kurdish region of Iraq.

In October 2003, deans of the Iraqi medical schools visited ETSU. The Iraqis had few of the resources they saw there. The next year, it was Quillen's turn to send personnel to northern Iraq. What specialty did the Iraqis request first? A medical librarian. They understood that what they needed most desperately was information.

So in December 2003, Suresh Ponnappa, director of ETSU's medical library, headed to Turkey on the first leg of a journey that took him



Bruce Behringer (left), of ETSU's Office of Rural and Community Health, and Dr. Hamanejm, dean of the Salahaddin College of Medicine in Erbil, holding CDs donated to the Iraqi school. The CDs contain information on anatomy and cell biology, and medical education lectures.

to the three medical schools in northern Iraq. Traveling from the Turkish town of Diyarbakir to the Iraqi border, Ponnappa and his driver found themselves in a line of trucks five miles long. Although the State Department had provided all the necessary documentation for Ponnappa, as well as \$12,000 worth of medical texts and CD-ROMs, border guards grilled the librarian for 40 minutes.

The first stop was in Dohuk, at the smallest of the three Iraqi-Kurd medical schools. There, Ponnappa presented programs to the 120 medical students, doctors, and the University of Dohuk's lone medical librarian. "The people are like a dry sponge," said Ponnappa, "soaking up information."

During more than a decade of decline under Saddam Hussein, the outdated medical library had become increasingly impoverished.

Library cards were handwritten. Periodicals were donated sporadically by international organizations. Textbooks had to be smuggled into the country, one or two at a time, then photocopied. The few computers they had were equipped with 28K modems.

One of Ponnappa's missions was to help the Iraqis organize the information and technology that had preceded him. While the Iraqis were visiting Tennessee, ETSU officials had asked how the Iraqis wanted to spend the money allocated to them by Meridian. Astonished at the choices and the freedom to choose, they settled on more information. The Iraqis pored over medical texts and CDs, title by title, trying to maximize their choices. They also chose "smart classrooms," consisting of a computer, a projector, and an electronic whiteboard; each medical school received three sets.



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Her most recent book is *History Hikes of the Smokies* (Great Smoky Mountains Association, 2003).

Ponnappa, who heads a regional e-resources consortium, helped negotiate a journal package on the Iraqis' behalf. With minimal internet access, they started with one fee-based database, MD Consult. Ponnappa helped to design a simple, low-load library portal for them accessible via ETSU (commedia1.etsu.edu/portal/). The site includes links to free online journals and databases, such as PubMed and the Directory of Open Access Journals.

The State Department grant also provided 20 computers per medical school. The resulting computer labs act as a bridge between the medical libraries and the schools they serve.

From Dohuk, Ponnappa next traveled to Erbil, a city of 660,000 that was founded by the Sumerians around 2300 B.C. The tense journey took Ponnappa and his driver past a cratered Saddam palace in Mosul. He arrived at the site of the second medical school just one day after that city's Ministry of Interior was bombed.

At the Salahaddin College of Medicine in Erbil, Ponnappa presented programs on medical information to both faculty and medical students: how to coordinate plans for medical library informatics, how to access the CD-ROMs he brought, and how to search for online information.

Here, too, he found people "thirsty for knowledge"—so much so that when students in the nursing and dental programs heard about his programs, they requested permission to attend.

From Erbil, Ponnappa traveled to Sulaimaniya, where he visited the most modern of northern Iraq's three medical schools. The road passes through the volatile Kirkuk region, home to Iraq's largest oil fields. As he and his bodyguard, who was armed with both an AK47 and a pistol, drove through the oil fields, Ponnappa saw a well on fire, spewing black, oily clouds into the mountain-rimmed sky. Despite palpable danger while traveling between cities, he was delighted to see a new public library rising in Sulaimaniya's downtown.



Suresh Ponnappa teaching medical faculty in Erbil in a donated computer lab (above) and with Suzanne Abercrombie, ETSU's liaison director for Healthcare Partnerships in Northern Iraq, with boxes of medical books and CDs ready to ship to three Iraqi medical colleges.

Through the grant, Ponnappa also arranged to ship thousands of dollars worth of books to the University of Sulaimaniya—critical information that will help bring medical staff and students into the 21st century. Although funds to support northern Iraq's medical libraries are less than certain in 2005, ETSU is hoping to find other grants. The Iraqis of the north hope so, too.

The Army pitches in

Library aid has not been limited to northern Iraq. In April 2003, Dr. Alexander Garza, chief of the U.S. Army's public health team for the 418th Civil Affairs Battalion, arrived for a year-long deployment in Iraq. Garza's mission, to help reestablish a working society, centered on the hospitals and medical school in Tikrit, Saddam Hussein's home town about 95 miles north of Baghdad.

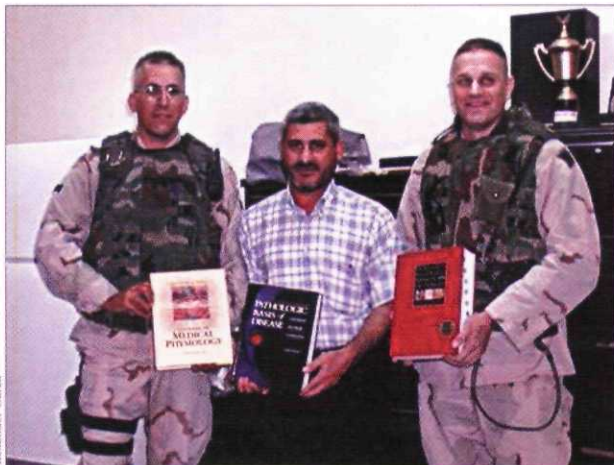
Health care in general had declined precipitously since the first Gulf war, and Tikrit's medical school library reflects that decline. The medical school is only 14 years old, yet most of the publications in its small

library are more than 25 years old.

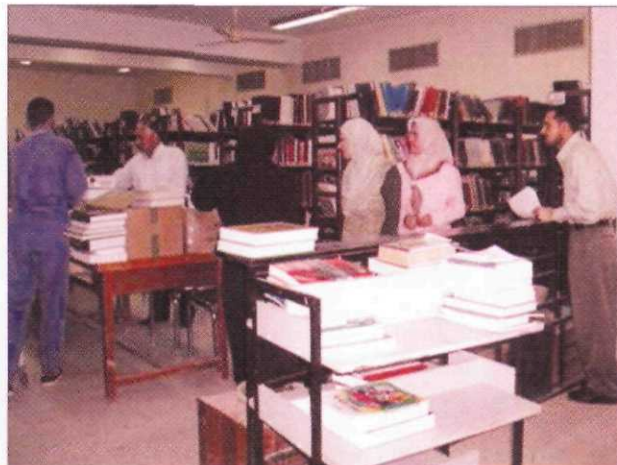
"Newer editions are kept on a single bookcase for all of the students to use. The copies possessed by the college of medicine are just that, photocopies of the originals, which are kept in Baghdad," said Garza.

The Tikrit medical school has about 600 students, yet the library has few copies of critical texts. Journals are at least five years old, and most have been smuggled into the country. Although the library had some computers when Garza arrived, getting information online was nearly impossible: Only one internet connection existed for the entire college of medicine. Also, Saddam had filtered internet access so strictly that even if the infrastructure had allowed it, medical faculty and students were prevented from accessing such sites as the U.S. National Library of Medicine.

Library staffing has its own problems. The majority of books and journals in the library are in English, yet the librarian and his assistant speak and read only Arabic—an unhappy situation for organizing a



Alexander Garza



The 418th Civil Affairs Battalion delivers new textbooks to Tikrit University. From left, Dr. Alexander Garza, Tikrit College of Medicine Dean Abid Salman, and 4th Infantry Division Surgeon Kirk Eggleston. Right, Tikrit medical librarians sort books donated by libraries in the United States.

collection, no matter how small. The collection, however, was about to become much larger.

Abid Salman, dean of the Tikrit University College of Medicine, had expressed particular concern about the state of the library, so David Gifford, a retired U.S. Army medical officer, set up a donation program for medical books and supplies to be shipped to Iraq. Garza put out a call for donations in an August 2003 article he wrote for *Medscape Nurses*, "Help for the Healthcare System in Iraq" (www.medscape.com/viewarticle/459771).

The book donation project started as a trickle but picked up considerable steam after David Keddle saw it. Keddle, a medical librarian at

Sunrise Hospital in Las Vegas, collected about 100 pounds of books from his hospital, but he unleashed a torrent of volumes when he posted a challenge on the MedLib discussion list. He dedicates his efforts to Nick Berg, the first American to be beheaded after the invasion, who "was there to help the people of Iraq," said Keddle.

Keddle's plea brought donations from libraries, medical centers, and hospitals around the country: the Franciscan Skemp Medical Center library in La Crosse, Wisconsin; the Santa Clara Valley Medical Center in San Jose, California; the Eastern Idaho Regional Medical Center in Idaho Falls; and the University of Tennessee Health Science Center in Memphis. UTHSC contacted publisher Elsevier, who organized and paid for shipping the 2,200 books it had collected—a total of approximately eight tons. WebMD's Medscape donated approximately 3,000 volumes, and the Merck pharmaceutical company donated *Merck Manuals*.

Garza, who now serves as assistant professor of emergency medicine at Truman Medical Center in Kansas City, Missouri, estimates that more than 10,000 books and journals have been sent to Iraq so far. Abid was exuberant: "We'll have the best library in all of Iraq," he told Garza.

In fact, the bounty of books is

being shared with other Iraqi medical schools and hospitals. Outside of the three in the north, Iraq has about a half-dozen other medical schools. Garza and his successors with the 415th Battalion took charge of sorting and loading the publications onto trucks and Humvees. Transporting the publications between cities has been somewhat treacherous, but the books and journals are reaching doctors and medical students who need them.

In May 2004, ETSU Rural and Community Health Administrator Bruce Behringer and two physicians made a follow-up visit to northern Iraq as part of their ongoing partnership. Their hosts showed them a statue of a woman breaking her chains, a symbol of women's education and social progress in general. Book, journal, and computer donations are a critical and promising start, but Iraqi medical schools and libraries still have a long way to go. Behringer could have been speaking for all of Iraq when, in referring to the statue, he said, "Right now they are living on symbols." ❖



Suresh Ponnappa

University of Dohuk Medical Library and its lone librarian.

Medical Books for Iraq

If your institution is interested in participating in the donation project, send an inquiry to: Public Health Team, 415th Civil Affairs Battalion, FOB Danger, APO, AE 09392.

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