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Doctors Heed Call for Books

By IRENE M. WIELAWSKI

Imagine cutting out a diseased appendix without ever having seen a Gray's Anatomy diagram, or calculating drug doses without a Physicians' Desk Reference, and you'll have an idea what it's like to practice medicine in [Afghanistan](#).

Nearly three decades of war and religious extremism have devastated medical libraries and crippled the educational system for doctors, nurses and other health professionals. Factions of the [Taliban](#), which ruled Afghanistan from 1996 to 2001, singled out medical texts for destruction, military medical personnel say, because anatomical depictions of the human body were considered blasphemous.

"They not only burned the books, but they sent monitors into the classroom to make sure there were no drawings of the human body on the blackboard," said Valerie Walker, director of the Medical Alumni Association of the [University of California, Los Angeles](#).

Ms. Walker is helping lead an ambitious effort by American doctors and nurses, both civilian and military, to restock Afghanistan's [hospitals](#), clinics and universities with medical [textbooks](#) and other reference materials.

The project, called [Operation Medical Libraries](#), began modestly in 2007 with a plea for books from a U.C.L.A. medical graduate serving in the Army. It has since been embraced by 30 universities and hospitals, more than a dozen professional organizations and scores of individual doctors and nurses.

“It’s hard to imagine working in an environment where you don’t have access to medical literature or the Internet,” said one donor, Dr. Lawrence Maldonado, director of the medical intensive care unit at Cedars-Sinai Medical Center in Los Angeles. “I have unbelievable resources where I work — libraries, lecture series, online — and I know that everything I read or learn helps me make better decisions and take better care of patients.”

Like most others involved in the program, Dr. Maldonado heard about it from a colleague. And word has spread among medical officers stationed in Afghanistan, who act as volunteer points of contact to shepherd books to the libraries.

One of them is Cmdr. David T. Beverly IV, a Navy ophthalmologist stationed at Camp Eggers in Kabul. The books he gets — 30 boxes so far — go to rebuild the library at Kabul Medical University, where most Afghan doctors receive their education, and at the nearby Afshar Hospital. “They’ve started a family medicine residency there using our books,” Commander Beverly said in a phone interview from Kabul.

By Ms. Walker’s estimate, 27,000 medical texts have reached Afghanistan through Operation Medical Libraries, but she adds that the number is probably much higher. Donors can contribute directly by visiting the project’s Web site, <http://opmedlibs.medalumni.ucla.edu>, to find a military volunteer’s address, then shipping the books on their own.

The system had some initial bugs. Col. Susan Bassett, an Air Force nurse stationed at an outpost hospital near Kandahar in 2008, said the first boxes she received were huge and heavy. “The people sending them didn’t realize we don’t have much equipment here — no dollies or anything to get the boxes on and off the trucks,” she said. So she spoke to Ms. Walker, who “put out the word to send smaller boxes.”

Colonel Bassett was assigned to serve as a mentor to Afghan Army nurses, so she was delighted to find books on medical diets, nursing, pharmacology and [physical therapy](#) among the donations — along with personal greetings from the donors.

“They all came with these homey notes: ‘Hope these help.’ ‘Hope you’re safe,’ ” said Colonel Bassett, who is now stationed at Keesler Air Force Base in Biloxi, Miss. “The generosity and

kindness of Americans, well, it just warmed my heart.”

While most of the books go to Afghanistan, some have found their way to medical libraries in places as far-flung as Mozambique, the Solomon Islands and Uganda. Books on biology, chemistry, anatomy, medicine, nursing, **dentistry**, pharmacology and physical therapy are all in demand — especially those published in the last five years.

The operation started with an e-mail that landed in Ms. Walker’s in box in April 2007, addressed simply “U.C.L.A. Medical Alumni Association.” Lt. Col. Laura Pacha, a 1998 graduate serving as an Army medical officer in Iraq, described a crippled medical education system and inadequate reference libraries.

“Sadly, anything since 1994 is considered current here,” she wrote, adding that a dearth of computers and frequent electricity failures made online resources largely inaccessible. She wondered if her fellow alumni might have books to spare, and provided her military address.

Ms. Walker, whose previous experience with donation drives was helping her daughter on Girl Scout projects, tackled the details. First she arranged for a campus bookstore to receive donations and got a commitment from the university’s R.O.T.C. commander to ship the books through military channels. Then she sent an e-mail blast to medical school alumni, summarizing Colonel Pacha’s request and the collection plan.

That first salvo went to medical school graduates in the Los Angeles area; Ms. Walker assumed they would be most likely to respond because they could drive their books to campus. But her e-mail recipients had other ideas, forwarding the message to colleagues and distant medical school classmates. Books began pouring in, for a total of 2,000 volumes in that first shipment.

Ms. Walker did not realize what she and Colonel Pacha had started. “I thought this was a one-time deal,” she said.

But the word was spreading. In January 2008, Ms. Walker heard from a Navy doctor in Afghanistan, who said the lack of textbooks was forcing medical students to rely almost entirely on lecture notes and memorization. Could she send him some books too?

Getting books wasn't the problem. The donations had never really stopped.

Dr. Christina S. Han, now a fellow in maternal and fetal medicine at [Yale](#), delivered 60 boxes to Ms. Walker after organizing a competitive book drive at the Los Angeles hospital where she was a resident.

Dr. Michael D. Stouder, a family physician in Mission Viejo, Calif., drove a carload of donations to Ms. Walker's office after hearing about the condition of Afghanistan's libraries from his son, an Army psychologist.

And Mark McKenney, at St. Mary's Hospital in Grand Junction, Colo., learned of the effort via an e-mail list for medical librarians. He persuaded administrators to include book drives for Afghanistan as part of his hospital's community service mission.

Meanwhile, Ms. Walker set about building an Internet-based structure that would enable Operation Medical Libraries to run at no cost to her university or the military. The biggest challenge, she said, was to develop an economical and reliable shipping system.

Colonel Pacha's suggestion that donations be shipped to her military address turned out to be the answer. The project now asks volunteers from the military to provide their addresses, enabling individual donors to ship at domestic bulk-mail rates of about 50 cents a pound, with no taxes or customs fees.

"You do everything through the U.S. mail service, so things don't get lost," Ms. Walker said. "We've sent well over 30 tons and haven't lost a box yet."