



## Me? Ethiopia? The Rewards of International Collaboration

**Librarians everywhere have** pet projects to support libraries outside their own four walls. Not many stretch that idea halfway across the world as Sandra Kendall has done by linking her health sciences library at Mount Sinai Hospital in Toronto with colleagues at the University of Addis Ababa. Sandra has now had a commitment to library staff, students, and faculty there through Toronto's Addis Ababa Academic Collaboration since 2008.

As Sandra describes it, this opportunity came out of nowhere. "I was trying to avoid the worst case scenario: one of our doctors was about to give away his password to someone in Ethiopia. Although this seems like a simple solution to help Ethiopian psychiatrists, I had to step in and say no, before we got in trouble. As a result I was suddenly invited to an international symposium in Africa and my first response was, 'I can't go there!'"

A more reluctant partner in international librarianship would be hard to find. Sandra originally thought it would be a crazy idea to travel to Africa. She had no idea what she would find when she got there, or how she could help in supporting access to health sciences information for medical professionals and students at Addis Ababa.

Surely, Sandra thought, there must be other librarians more qualified and already engaged in helping colleagues in East Africa with access to journals. But despite searching high and low for information professionals, organizations, associations, listservs, or other ways and means of bringing support to health and information professionals overseas, she struck out; if help was needed, she was going to have to pitch in herself to resolve the issue of access to current health sciences literature.

After it was clear that a librarian was needed to complete the team of health professionals going to Ethiopia to provide training at Addis Ababa University,



Photo credit:

Sandra quickly identified the training needs. In 2010, a grant and support from the University of Toronto Libraries as well as the Addis Ababa University Libraries made the work possible. Four librarians conducted the first two-week training session. Based on the session's success a second round of training was offered in 2012. "When I first entered the library [at Addis Ababa] it was full of students, not an empty seat to be had, and yet the books were twenty to thirty years old. They didn't do clinical queries, so that was an obvious starting point for our role as trainers. Together my Ethiopian counterpart and I developed a partnership agreement and set deliverables." The ability to modify and add to the training program on the fly is essential to success in the international context, where conditions can change quickly and expectations are often sky high.

The results extend beyond Sandra's enthusiasm for training and providing access. "We were pretty excited to introduce the role of health libraries in addressing the medical information needs of patients and families as well. Over 140 people, including eighteen librarians, attended our training, and our survey three months later stated that over 140 other learners had been taught by those librarians who had attended our training sessions. We can see the train-the-trainer

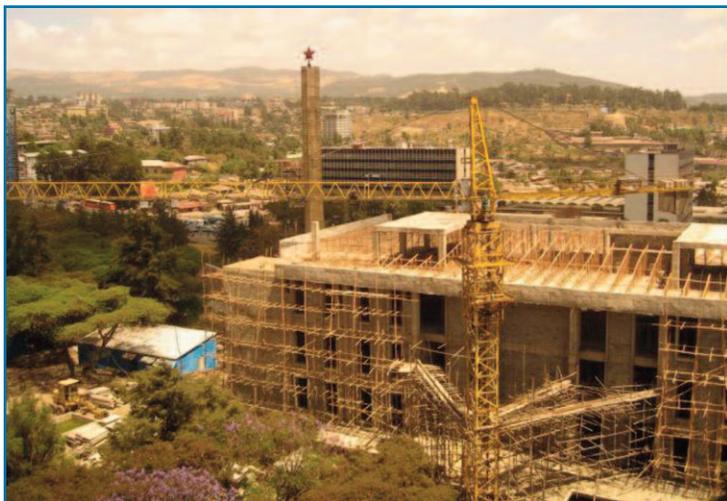


Photo credit:

model working.” The report on training outcomes is available online at [http://taaaclibrarygroup.wordpress.com/about\\_taac\\_library\\_program/project-outcomes/](http://taaaclibrarygroup.wordpress.com/about_taac_library_program/project-outcomes/).

It has been both a demanding and an expensive project. “We shipped over three thousand current medical library titles. Distance training and on-site training is ongoing. We have been creative [in our fundraising] and rented out a library book collection for a backdrop in the remake of the movie *Robocop* [2014]. The result was \$1,000 put toward our 2012 training. Thanks to a friend and supporter—Bonnie Horn from UofT [University of Toronto] Libraries—for sending this opportunity our way!”

Any partnership has challenges, and international partnerships have cultural and language differences to add to the mix. “Sometimes this work is very frustrating and difficult and you can’t see your way forward, but then one success and all that frustration is gone and a great sense of achievement remains. Our shipment was tied up in customs last year. This meant a lot of sleepless nights for me. But there is nothing to compare to seeing those books on the shelf being used by the health professionals who requested them and really don’t have any alternatives.”

Asked about what gives her the most satisfaction about her international work, Sandra says, “I would like to note that in Ethiopia a core concern of the government was the request for a medical librarian on the team. They truly believe that you can’t turn out good doctors without a good medical library. That is a real boost for me, my work, and our profession.”

Since coming back from her first training sessions, Sandra’s approach to library users back in Canada has changed. “I start by asking our library users what department they are working with, and I may also ask, ‘Where are you from?’” Customizing user training to match the experience and skill set of the user is critical for meeting the needs of international researchers, students, and others. Familiarity with expensive databases does not always extend to those who come from places where subscription costs are beyond the reach of educational institutions. Although as library professionals we know we are supposed to do this, often we forget that crucial first step of determining where the user is in terms of searching and utilizing various research tools.

It has also given Sandra a new angle on introducing the best evidence to international students. She tries to figure out what they have been or will be able to access in their home country versus the UofT library system. The new connections she has made outside her library to clinicians as a result of being part of this international team are exciting, and they expand the library reach into new relationships, strengthening library value in Canada for professionals who see how much traditional library search skills add to the training offered in the Ethiopian context.

Sandra is always ready to offer support to other librarians interested in working internationally. “I think everybody should get involved with their community. And our community is the entire world. I would love to see every library twin or partner with another library in a developing country. I have negotiated with a vendor to provide access to online publications for our Ethiopia colleagues and I offer to help provide reference service from here. It hasn’t been overwhelming responding to queries; the challenges are worth it.” 

*The author of the article wishes to thank Sandra Kendall, Director, Health Sciences Library, Mount Sinai Hospital, and Global Health Scholar, the Peter A. Silverman Centre for International Health and the Wilson Centre of the University of Toronto, for her interview.*