Electronic Animal Health Information: outreach services and continuing education for the practicing veterinarians’ changing information needs

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1. The electronic library scene in Finland

The new highway to electronic research data was launched in Finland in 1998, as a result of the foundation of the program called the National Electronic Library abbreviated FinELib. Its aim is to support research and teaching in Finland by providing efficient end-user access to a wide range of online electronic material through an integrated electronic interface. The end-user can take advantage of the electronic services at the own work station regardless of time and place. The use of the commercial electronic material acquired by the FinELib consortium is strictly restricted to researchers, teachers, students, staff and libraries of the Finnish universities, research institutes and polytechnics. The licensing negotiations and consortia agreements are handled centrally by FinELib situated in the premises of the Helsinki University Library which implements the program in practice. The program is funded by the Ministry of Education. The centralised funding is intended primarily for the universities which, however, are taking part in funding the material according to a fixed economic model. The research institutes and polytechnics are joining up to 100 % with their own funding. However, a national agreement aims to ensure that all the participants will benefit as much as possible from the project.

FinELib acquires Finnish and foreign electronic material for Finland, such as scientific journals, reference databases for specialist fields and reference books. The goal of FinELib is to provide material serving as many scientific disciplines as possible. A customer may obtain an article in electronic form via a catalogue of electronic journals, a reference database for a specialist field, a library catalogue, an encyclopedia etc. Today the electronic library offers nearly 3000 full text scholarly journals and close to 80 reference databases and reference books like encyclopedias, dictionaries, law material and statistics, national as well as international. The material belonging to the FinELib is available either to all Internet users, or requires user agreements and is only available to users of the institutions belonging to the FinELib user consortia on an unlimited and fair use basis.

FinELib is also aiming at improving information retrieval from the information network. There has been a lot of planning of the development of an own graphical user interface for the heterogenous information resources covered by FinELib. FinELib works in close cooperation with other national development programs. Common concerns include electronic publishing, long term storage of electronic material, copyright and other topical issues.

All the customers of the libraries of the universities in Finland do benefit from FinELib. The libraries naturally have to complement the FinELib collections with electronic collections of their own.

2. Special features of the veterinary education and profession in Finland

Veterinary medicine is one of the most popular fields of academic education in Finland. Motivation to study is very high and only a few of the students fail to complete their degree. The Faculty of Veterinary Medicine at the University of Helsinki including the University Animal
Hospital is the only establishment of higher education in Finland to educate veterinary surgeons. The Faculty is also responsible for their postgraduate studies and furthermore participates in the continuing education of practicing veterinarians. The education given by the Faculty qualifies students to work in different fields of the veterinary profession: not only to see to the health of all domestic animal species and treat their diseases, they also supervise meat and milk inspection as well as the hygiene of dairies, abattoirs, meat processing plants and other food industries. Also animal welfare and prevention of infectious diseases are on their responsibility.

The veterinary profession in Finland is undergoing a change along with the change in agricultural structure and also due to the higher demand for specialisation in sub-disciplines. Finland joining the EU has increased the supervisory functions of veterinarians.

There are approximately 1300 veterinarians in Finland. Their labour market is wide. Of them less than 400 work as municipal veterinarians and local veterinary officers. The municipal veterinarian deals not only with the traditional veterinary tasks but also with governmental duties, e.g. food hygiene in a larger extent than ever and also animal welfare. Then government employs approximately 200 veterinarians for the moment. This number includes veterinarians working at the central government run by the Ministry of Agriculture and Forestry, the National Agency for Food Hygiene and Veterinary Medicine and the Faculty of Veterinary Medicine at University of Helsinki including the University Animal Hospital. There are less private practitioners than municipal veterinarians. The private practitioners are almost exclusively in the small animal or equine business, with only a few of them working full time with production animals and herd health. This is a special feature of Finland, in which the municipal veterinarians earlier used to treat all animals, large and small. Slightly less than 200 young veterinarians are very mobile and work shorter periods in different areas of the country, without having a private practice of their own. Usually these settle down after a few years of gathering experience and constant moving.

The rest of the veterinarians are within the industry, other than veterinary fields or simply retired.

Almost all of these veterinarians are members of the Finnish Veterinary Association. The purpose of the association is to act as a link between its members and to promote veterinary science and the practice of veterinary medicine in Finland and to care for the professional, societal, commercial and social interests of veterinarians and their joint aspirations. The Finnish Veterinary Association engages in publishing and supports research into veterinary science, organizes talks, lectures and other continuing educational events especially the annual Finnish Veterinary Congress.

3. The Veterinary Medicine Library

The library of the Faculty of Veterinary Medicine of the University of Helsinki including the University Animal Hospital is the only veterinary medicine library in its subject field in Finland. It thus holds the position of national resource library in veterinary medicine and to some extent food hygiene. In this capacity it also functions as the Finnish node of the Nordic and international network of veterinary medicine libraries. It is a member of the Nordic NOVA University (veterinary medicine, agriculture and forestry), EAHIL’s EVLG-group and takes part in VetLib.

The main tasks of the library are to:
- acquire and lend material in its area of responsibility
- supply national and international loans and copies
- produce various reference databases in its subject area in co-operation with the libraries of the University of Helsinki
- provide electronic networked material like reference databases, other reference tools and full text journals in co-operation with the University of Helsinki National Health Library and Viikki Science (and Agricultural) Library and the FinELib program.
- provide updated links on the organized library web-site to central sources of importance to veterinary medicine
- provide information skills education
- co-ordinate the electronic publishing of the Faculty
- function as an information consultant for the broad spectrum of customers from veterinary medicine
- follow the developments in the library and information field and participate in development projects

As the central resource in veterinary medicine for all veterinarians in Finland, the aim of the library is to provide library services of high quality not only to its core clientele, the students, teachers, researchers and staff of the Faculty and the hospital, but on an equal basis to all practicing veterinarians in Finland. Internet and the web technology has fostered the library’s efforts to provide outreach services. The changes in the profession seem to have increased the interest in information provided by the library.

The FinELib program with its wide range of sources and the sharing of electronic resources in the network with the two libraries holding the most important adjacent subject fields of human health and agriculture, has improved the Veterinary Medicine Library’s services to the core clientele without rising costs.

The goal in the library’s strategy for its external customers, which cannot use the commercial FinELib and electronical university resources according to signed agreements, is to make as much digital material with non-restricted use, as possible available in Internet at decent costs through a well-structured web-site. The material should be supplemented by lectures in how to most effectively search and use the material. The library’s strategy in regard to printed sources has likewise been to serve all the veterinarians directly with loans and copies, despite in which part of the vast country they are working.

4. The veterinary medicine library consortium

Using the FinELib consortium rules and licensing models as an example, the Veterinary Medicine Library acted as the initiator and consultant in forming a consortium involving the Faculty of Veterinary Medicine, the National Agency for Food Hygiene and Veterinary Medicine and the Finnish Veterinary Association for the provision of the VetCD and BeastCD databases. The library reached an agreement with the vendors of VetCD and BeastCD that the Finnish Veterinary Association in this case is a suitable legal entity of the consortium. Through the economic support of the association the practicing veterinarians around the country can sign for access to these important databases. The use is restricted to the members of the association, which is responsible for the administration and distribution of the user identifications and passwords. The Finnish Veterinary Association shares a web-site with the Finnish Medical Association. Because of the natural interface of animal and human health information the practicing veterinarians can benefit from this arrangement. The medical association provides a number of medical networked resources, like some medical full text journals, Pharmaca Fennica and some national and international reference databases including the free PubMed.

The following publications produced at the Faculty of Veterinary Medicine are so far provided for free also to external customers and made searchable through the library web-site. The short theses written for the degree of licentiate in veterinary medicine contain valuable new information for practicing veterinarians. All abstracts in theses written since 1990 are digitized. Theses of good quality are made available as full text versions with the help of E-thesis, the electronic publishing and distribution services of the University of Helsinki. All dissertations of the Faculty published since 1999 are digitized and also made available in cooperation with the E-thesis service. Products, mostly teaching material, published by the Faculty will also be available in full text via E-thesis, except for those restricted to internal use only.
The library is responsible for the production of reference databases of books and periodicals in its field, of journal articles written by Finnish veterinarians and of publications written by members of the Faculty of Veterinary Medicine. The HELKA library catalogue, the AGRI: book&articles and JULKI databases are all freely available and together give a good picture of the library holdings and the subjects treated in publications by veterinarians in a national and international context. Special tools help the customers to order documents directly from the library. A complementary database to these is the Nordic NOVAGate subject gateway to selected Internet resources. The full texts of Finnish law and regulations, free dictionaries, full text reports and EU material add to the available selection of resources for the external customers of the library.

No feasible agreements have so far been reached to provide commercial electronic full text scholarly journals to the practicing municipal veterinarians unless they visit the Veterinary Medicine Library. As a little compensation the library is keeping an up-dated list with links to free full text journals and tables of content available in Internet of periodicals acquired by the library.

Questionnaires in connection with the courses in information skills have showed mainly positive feedback. However, it is obvious that some time and training is needed to get full value of the sources as well as get used to the user interfaces.

5. The teaching of information skills

The introduction of on-line electronic material in Internet through the library’s web-site requires education in how to search and use the material most effectively. Many of the municipal veterinarians are working alone or do have small practices and are thus not yet used to PC:s as natural working tools. A gradual growth of PC:s and Internet use can be recognized, among other things through the interest in courses in information skills.

The Veterinary Medicine Library has started a systematic co-operation by liaising with three of the obvious partners responsible for continuing education of practicing veterinarians. These are the Finnish Veterinary Association, the University of Helsinki Institute for Continuing Education and the provincial librarians. The wish put forward by the library has been that the lectures in information skills are an integrated part of the continuing education courses.

The library teaches a separate course in information skills as part of the official program of the Annual Finnish Veterinary Congress arranged by the association. Veterinarians from many parts of the country participated and were quite satisfied. A second repetitive session in a half years time was wished for. The agreement with the Institute for Continuing Education has been to teach information skills as an integrated part of the course, with a span of two years, on changing tasks of the practicing veterinarian. The learners seemed to be motivated by the fact that search problems were related to the subject of the other lectures at the course. The library is trying to take a problem based approach in its teaching and have two teachers available for a small group, so as to reach true interactivity. The immediate response from the course was positive. The experiences of co-operation with the provincial state offices and their veterinarian is so far limited. The first information skills lectures were integrated in the general program and the immediate response was fairly positive. A real outreach program should be planned with most of the provincial veterinarians in order to reach the municipal veterinarians. Results of a second questionnaire to the learners after a time of individual search of information will hopefully be presented at the conference.