To the Editors:

Bibliographic referencing made easy: use of bibliographic software in health research

Introduction

The purpose of bibliographic referencing is to organise information about materials on a given subject so that readers may have access to it. There are two major referencing systems: the Vancouver system, where references are numbered consecutively in the order in which they appear in the text [1]; and the Harvard system where references are cited in text by author's name and the year, and listed according to the alphabetical order [2]. Most journals have their own house style for references.

Computer software has evolved to aid the individual researcher to record, organize and use citations of references to sources of information – predominantly articles, books – used in the course of their work [3, 4]. The software tailor-made to referencing purposes are commonly referred to as Personal Bibliographic Manager (PBM) software [3]. The widely used products include EndNote, Pro-cite, Papyrus and Reference Manager [3, 5, 6].

Research contributions and publications by Sri Lankan biomedical professionals are on the increase. But only very few maintain an electronic collection of references, and perform citation using bibliographic software. In contrast, PBM software is widely used by the researchers in developed countries [4, 7, 8]. The present communication aims to discuss the difficulties faced by Sri Lankan health researchers in referencing, and the relevance of applying a personal bibliographic software in addressing these problems.

This report is based on the experiences and views of non-users and users of bibliographic software [9]. The problems faced by Sri Lankan researchers were identified by informal discussions with a group of bio-medical professionals in the country. Those expressed their views had experience in research publications, but never used any bibliographic software. Users' experiences were obtained from 22 international scientists who used bibliographic software and published their experiences on the website of a particular software [8]. The present author's personal experience in preparation of manuscripts supplements this information [10, 11].

Sri Lankan bio-medical researchers are aware of the existence of software to make bibliography, but almost none had used it. Their usual way of compiling reference list is either by typing or 'copying and pasting' while typesetting. Typesetting is a time consuming task, and causes errors, especially with rigid deadlines as in postgraduate research. It was more time consuming with thesis than with journal articles, due to the greater number

of references involved. Inserting or deleting a citation after completion of bibliography is troublesome, especially with the Vancouver style. Other issues include: difficulty in changing the output style to suit the journal's house style; missing characters such as commas, and colons; and complexity of formats for certain publications such as reports, maps and electronic resources.

Box. Advantages of using personal bibliographic software

- Maintains a personal reference database (reference library) and performs editing, sorting, and searching of references within this personal collection
- Formats citations and reference list while writing in Microsoft Word
- Reference output style can be easily changed from one style to another
- Allows direct downloading of citation with the abstract
- Acts as an online search tool for indexed journals
- Cites literature accurately
- Huge time-saver
- Little computer knowledge is enough

The main functions of any bibliographic software include [3]:

- Maintenance of a database of references
- Downloading references
- Using the database to link references in word processed documents
- Generate the bibliography in the correct style for publication

A bibliographic software usually helps authors format their bibliography according to the citation styles of many bio-medical journals [9], and there is evidence that this function is very useful for both authors and editors in biomedical journals [12]. Another attractive feature is the direct downloading facility that facilitates researchers to create a personal collection of references including the

abstracts quickly, accurately and correctly. Most journals available online now provide a link to download the citation directly into a personal collection through a bibliographic software [5, 13]. It is a great advantage that some of these software work in conjunction with the popular word processor Microsoft Word with the 'cite while you write' feature. However, studies have shown that the search capability of referencing software through connecting to distant databases is lower than using MEDLINE directly [14]. There is a need of applying a user-friendly bibliographic software in their research. Poor availability at the local setting, cost and lack of awareness are the major limitations for wide application of bibliographic software in Sri Lanka.

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