A Functional Information Retrieval System for Forensic Psychiatrists (One Man's System)

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The professional literature in forensic psychiatry has increased several-fold in the past few years, as evidenced by the appearance of two new journals, our *Bulletin* and the *Journal of Psychiatry & Law*. The increasing interest of the legal profession in mental health has further produced literature important to the forensic psychiatrist: numerous law review issues devoted to symposia on various problems of the mentally ill; feature articles on the subject in "throw-away mags," *The Psychiatric News* and "regular" journals; and numerous books. A similar increase in the volume of material we "should" read has also occurred in general psychiatry, as the fields of psychopharmacology, neurobiology, sociology and anthropology, to name only a few, have made important contributions to our practice.

Merely to read all one should has become an overwhelming task. To maintain this wealth of information in some retrievable form has also become a challenge. Hours can be wasted in the attempt to locate the source of some information needed for a case, speech, or article, unless a system of retrieval can be developed. In order to be effective, however, such a system must be efficient in time and materials.

Despite the obvious need for such a system, there is no "package" readily available for our use which is generally applicable to the small office. Merely setting aside articles without a system of retrieval proves impossible, as I am sure everyone has discovered. Use of the librarian's Dewey Decimal system or the topics of Index Medicus either is too complicated or cumbersome or does not lend itself to our specific needs. Over the years I have developed a system which works fairly well for me, although it still is not perfected.

Thomas G. Gutheil, M.D., in a recent article in the *Journal of the American Psychiatric Association* (131:10, Oct 1974, pp 1145–1147), describes the system he has evolved for use in general psychiatry. Upon reading his article I thought that certain aspects of my system might be sufficiently unique to forensic psychiatry to warrant this brief communication. I hoped also to open up further communication from others (more to read) to reveal other, and possibly superior, systems.

Gutheil's system consists of "tearing up" journals and newspapers and stapling together articles he wishes to keep. These are then filed under 67 major headings with additional sub-headings. Cross references are maintained by 3x5 cards or "slips of paper" in the files. While this system may be satisfactory for Gutheil, I find from experience that I must keep the number of headings to a minimum; besides, I object to tearing up many of my journals, since I keep several intact and bound, although I do tear out articles from those journals I do not have bound.

My system is based on both a topic index and an author index of numbered reprints

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and bound journals or books. The topics utilized are listed below and reflect my personal needs and interests. Since I have four journals bound, I do not remove materials from them, nor do I tear up symposia issues or similar materials that might contain other articles of future interest. I mark the journal's index page so that my secretary can record the item appropriately: I mark either an "R" or a circle and the subject to be filed under. The "R" means "Write for a reprint," and the plain circle and topic mean "Assign a number and list on the file cards under the appropriate topic and by authors, indicating the volume and page and its presence on my bookshelf." Those reprints that I considered important enough to request are presented to me so that I can reread them and assign topics for filing them.

Reprints and torn-out material are filed in a standard filing case by number, while materials in books, reports or bound volumes remain in the bookcase. I staple torn-out articles and write the appropriate topic heading in the upper right hand corner. (Sometimes the title lists the heading and it can simply be encircled.) Entire books, chapters or special reports are noted for numbering and inclusion in the card index by a note to the secretary.

The key to the system is the 5x8 card index, which lists all items by number but is indexed and cross-indexed by both author and topic. Therefore, if a particular article on dangerousness is desired, the cards on the topic Dangerousness, Aggression and Violence are reviewed until the number of the appropriate article is located. If only the author is known, then it is looked for under the alphabetical author index. The article is then located by number in the file drawer or on the bookshelf as indicated on the index card.

The topics which I have used for several years and which best fit my needs are as follows:

Abortion
Adolescents, juveniles and delinquents
Alcoholism
Arrest
Auto Deaths and Death Penalty
Behavior Therapy
Battered Child
Capital Punishment
Clinics
Commitment
Community
Competency, Testamentary Capacity & Responsibility
Confidentiality & Privileged Communication
Consultations
Court
Dangerousness, Aggression & Violence
Decisions
Drugs and Addiction
Exercise
Enforced Treatment
Follow-Up
Forensic Psychiatry
Forensic Medicine
Family Law
Future Studies
Genetics

Hospitals & DMH (Department of Mental Hygiene)
History
Judges (& sentencing)
Lawyers & Legal
Legislation & Laws
Medicine
Malpractice
Medical Economics
Neurology, Epilepsy, Amnesia
Offender & Offenses (excluding sex)
Patuxent Institution
Personal Injury & Workmen's Compensation
Planning
Prisons
Psychiatry
Psychiatric (Diagnostic) groups
Psychology
Psychopathic Personality & Antisocial Reaction
Police
Religion
Research & Statistics
Sex, Sex Offenders & Offenses
Social Factors & Sociology
Speech
Suicide
Teaching & Training & Education
Treatment & Therapy
Testifying
XYY

A sample topic card under Dangerousness would appear as follows:

Dangerousness, Aggression & Violence

#3038—"The Indeterminate Sentence at Patuxent", Carney, Francis L., Crime and Delin-
quency, April 1974

#3045—"A Brief Review of Psychiatric Controversies at CMF", California Medical
Facility, April 16, 1974

#3096—"When the Patient Reports Atrocities", S. A. Haley, Arch. General Psychiat.
30:2, Feb. 1974 (bookcase)

#3081—"The Role of Depression in the Treatment of Aggressive Personality Disorders,"
John R. Lion, M.D., Amer. J. Psychiat. 129:3, Sept. 1972

This system has the following advantages:

1. Journals may be kept (and bound) not only for the value of the currently desired articles but also for future needs which may not have been anticipated.

2. Materials of all types are readily available under a limited number of headings.

3. A pen, stapler, file cards and file box are all that is required; the system is simple enough to work without a secretary—although that would require more time.

4. Reduction of material can be readily accomplished every several years by looking at the bookshelf or in the numbered file drawer and throwing out what is outdated or useless. (The file cards don't have to be cleaned out: they occupy little space, and each card contains multiple numbers, titles and/or names.)

5. The system could work quite well with photocopies rather than reprints, or with torn-out articles as Gutheil recommends.

6. The smaller number of topics, used with a cross-reference system using both author and multiple topics, facilitates retrieval.

I hope that this article and Gutheil's article will encourage others to communicate any information retrieval systems which they believe serve them well.