10 Questions:
Jeffrey Aubuchon

HELPING DOCTORS REDUCE INFANT MORTALITY OR HIV INFECTION RATES IN DEVELOPING COUNTRIES REQUIRES JEFFREY AUBUCHON TO PRACTICE 'CREATIVE KNOWLEDGE MANAGEMENT.' A KEEN UNDERSTANDING OF WORLD HISTORY HELPS, TOO.

BY STUART HALES

Providing better (and better access to) information can do almost as much to improve public health as investing in medical technology. But what happens when information is brought to bear on public health problems in remote, undeveloped areas of the world? Can information professionals contribute to health outcomes in areas that lack electricity and Internet access?

Jeffrey Aubuchon thinks they can. He works for Management Sciences for Health (MSH), which seeks to improve the health of the world's poorest and most vulnerable people. *Information Outlook* spoke to him about how he adds value to the services MSH delivers.

STUART HALES is publications editor at SLA and editor of *Information Outlook*.

Q: Tell us about your employer, Management Sciences for Health. What does MSH do?

Management Sciences for Health is approaching its 40th year. We're classified as an international health organization, and we work on a global scale—we have offices in 33 countries and experience in 140 countries around the world. Our staff members are global as well, representing 74 nationalities.

Our goal, as a public health organization, is to improve the health of the world's poorest and most vulnerable people. We do that by closing the gap between knowledge and action—what is *known* about certain public health problems and what can be *done* to solve those problems. We work a lot of times with ministries of health and local non-governmental organizations to support them and help make their work better and more efficient.

Q: What's your role at MSH?

My job in all of this is to make sure that our more than 2,000 staff people around the world have easy access to the evidence-based knowledge they need to save lives. We don't provide direct health care services—we have several doctors on staff, but they don't give shots or anything like that. Instead, we work to strengthen health care systems. To do that, our people need to know about best practices in HIV/AIDS treatment or cutting-edge therapies to reduce maternal mortality. My job is to get that knowledge to our technical experts in the field.

That's actually just half of my job; the other half is to take unpublished knowledge—say, our experience from a project in Bangladesh—and see what we can learn from it, then apply it to a different project somewhere else. In essence, the challenge is to exchange

knowledge on a global scale. I use traditional library techniques, but I'm also doing a lot of creative knowledge management, trying to get necessary and vital pieces of information to really remote places.

Doing this requires overcoming some pretty serious obstacles. When we're working with a rural health clinic in Ethiopia, for example, we can't assume there will be a reliable supply of electricity or Internet access. It makes knowl-

Corps. We served in Morocco, and I used a lot of my library skills there. We built four libraries in the desert for local communities, and the great thing about it was that they never knew I was a librarian by training. They knew I was a teacher, but not a librarian; they were the ones who proposed the library projects, not I.

When our Peace Corps assignment was finished, I decided that rather than go back to teaching I would stick with

in Washington, D.C., where I was able to hear what like-minded organizations such as USAID and the World Bank are doing with knowledge management. This was a particularly helpful benchmark against which to measure MSH's activities.

Second, I've participated in some SLA Boston discussions and events, most recently the chapter's centennial. Like the national conference, local events are always helpful for hearing about the problems other information professionals are facing and their creative solutions. The Boston centennial also included a very helpful facilitated dialogue between vendors and customers, and I'm eager to continue to participate in similar local events structured by the chapter.

Lastly, *Information Outlook* helps me stay abreast of trends, like global libraries and embedded librarianship, between SLA events. I think some of the educator-focused associations I've participated in as a teacher could benefit from the strong organizational example of SLA, and I'm very pleased to be a member.

Photo: Management Sciences for Health

Students at a vocational school in Ethiopia learn to work with leather.

edge management a bit of a creative challenge.

Q: What did you do prior to coming to MSH, and how did your previous jobs prepare you for your current duties?
My first job out of college was teaching world history at a small high school in Manchester, New Hampshire. I was there for four years, and from there I went on to teach history at the college level for a few years.

While I was doing those things, I went back to school. I already had a master's degree in history, and I went back to get an MSLS from Clarion University in Pennsylvania. I got some practical experience in librarianship as a reference librarian at a different college from the one at which I was teaching. This gave me some interesting insights into academic librarianship.

In 2007, my wife and I decided that we wanted a change, so we packed up our belongings and joined the Peace

international development and library science and the intersection of the two. I ended up at MSH, but now I've gone back to teaching—I'm an adjunct professor of American history at a community college. So I have the best of both worlds.

In terms of how my previous experience prepared me for my current duties, I say every day that I'm thankful I studied world history. Everything I do here is rooted in understanding the historical and cultural contexts of countries and regions where MSH works. I never cease to amaze myself at how much I rely on my knowledge of world history to do my job.

Q: How have your membership and involvement in SLA contributed to your professional success?
I've benefited from SLA membership in three ways, all of which are tied to networking. First, I had the good opportunity to attend the 2009 SLA conference

Q: What skills and knowledge have you acquired since arriving at MSH, and what skills and knowledge do you think you'll need to acquire over the next 5-10 years to stay on the leading edge?
Although MSH is a nonprofit organization, I had never worked in a corporate setting before. I had been a teacher and a Peace Corps volunteer. Simply working at MSH has been a real wakeup call about the corporate skills I need to learn.

The most pressing thing I've learned while at MSH is the structure of big donors, particularly USAID and the World Health Organization. The kind of development work that MSH does is on a much different scale than I was familiar with in the Peace Corps. That's been my biggest eye-opener—how the process of international development takes place.

Moving ahead, we're going to have to learn—and we're already starting to do this—how to more effectively get

knowledge to our staff. I really think the vehicle for that is going to be mobile technology, not just with phones but also with some other small computer-type devices. The questions we'll have to address are how to do it wirelessly in the places where we work, and how to do it smartly.

The biggest challenges around this are issues concerning copyright. A large portion of my time is already spent ensuring copyright compliance, and issues concerning copyright and intellectual property are only going to increase, not decrease, as we deal with this mountain of information that keeps piling up.

Q: The motto of Management Sciences for Health is "Stronger health systems, greater health impact." How would you say your work contributes to the company's impact on global health?

The library team quantifies this when we look at the volume of documents we keep in the archives, or the number of articles we send out to the field. Those are handy metrics, but I don't think they're the sorts of things that really make a difference.

We more readily see impact when we can identify the tangible health results from a project, like the number of lives saved or the number of interventions delivered, and we can trace it back and say, "That project was predicated on a literature review that was conducted by the library in the fall of 2010." On the surface, the library's contribution to the health impact may go unnoticed, but we can look backward at the end of a project and point to where the pieces started to come together.

A clearer example is what we do to support our publishing. Our health experts are always preparing articles for publications such as *The Lancet* and *The Bulletin of the World Health Organization*, and we most demonstrate our value when we prepare our authors to write these articles and help them place a health intervention that's occurring in, say, Afghanistan, in the context of similar health interventions that are going on elsewhere.

Photo: Melissa Aubuchon

Jeffrey Aubuchon teaches children in Morocco how to properly brush their teeth.

Q: Technology has made a huge difference in how the library field delivers products and services. As someone in the field of international health, what do you think is gained by using technology, and what do you think is sacrificed?

I'm very old fashioned in that sense. My supervisor, who is director of knowledge exchange at MSH, is based in Washington, D.C., and I'm in Massachusetts. He's very savvy with technology, and we have weekly video conferences and we're also able to video conference with some of our field offices, which certainly increases our reach and our productivity. But this is really a challenge for me, because I find I'm at my best when I'm working one-on-one with someone or in a small group of folks. I really think the ability to engage in Socratic dialogue is important, and it's been sacrificed to technology.

Teaching has provided me with another perspective on this issue, because the courses I'm teaching at the college level are online. This isn't the first time I've taught this way, but I find there's a noticeable difference from teaching in a classroom. It's not in the *amount* of interaction—that's the same—but in the *depth* of it and in what happens with the person-to-person encounter.

In terms of facilitating information flows, I think technology has exacerbated this problem. The ability to send articles and references through e-mail makes for sloppy research, in my opinion, and I think the trade-off of gaining speed but losing context and nuance is terrible.

I have something of a rivalry going with my assisting librarian, Karen Frenchu. She's a big proponent of Google, and she's stellar at using it. She's good at picking out kernels of information, whereas I find myself quite reluctant to use Google. I know I need to use Google and similar applications, but I find many times when dealing with staff members that they think they'll be able to find something on Google and I'll find it faster than they can by using a more traditional approach. A lot of my time is spent building "capacity" in my staff by trying to teach them alternatives to Google or simply showing them how to use better keywords to find things through Google.

While I know we have to embrace technology to move forward, and there are some promising tools out there (especially in the area of mobile technology), I'm quite a skeptic. But I also recognize my bias. I tell everyone in my office that not a day goes by that I don't miss the students I used to have in my

classroom. I'm certainly wedded to my old career as a teacher!

Q: I understand you teach information literacy skills to your experts in the field. Language barriers aside, what are some of the challenges you face in this area?

The first is a practical one. I was conducting a presentation about a year ago in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, and we had a lot of staff scheduled to participate. We had about a two-hour window to conduct the presentation, and we couldn't get an Internet connection—the server was down. Fortunately, that problem is improving. Even in West Africa, you can log on with ease in many places at any time.

A big priority for my team in this fiscal year is to figure out how to get people out in the field clustered together so we can conduct some intensive training. We're also doing some online teach-

Photo: Melissa Aubuchon

Jeffrey Aubuchon (back row, fourth from left) stands with students and teachers outside a new library in Morocco.

ing—we're developing courses on information literacy that can be delivered virtually and will provide an overview of sources available to them and how to critically analyze those sources.

Traveling to the field isn't the easiest way to deliver training and it's resource intensive, so we try to pair it with project-related travel. When we know someone is going out to provide technical assistance, we have that person conduct training while they're there. It doesn't have to be an immediate member of our

team, as long as it's someone we know who can convey the information. But when you work in as many countries as we do, providing information literacy training is quite an undertaking.

Q: Earlier this year, you went to Ethiopia. What was that like?

I was in Ethiopia working for MSH on a WHO contract. I was conducting a global mapping exercise on maternal and child health. One of the groups I was meeting with—I believe their name was the Ethiopian Interfaith Forum for Development Dialogue and Action—does excellent work on maternal and child health as well as HIV and AIDS.

While I was there, I asked them what else they were doing with MSH, and their leader said, "My team is participating in the virtual leadership development program." Now, just down the hall from my office here in Cambridge is the group that manages this virtual

program, so I'm quite familiar with their work and what they're doing. I asked the Ethiopians how it was going, and they were absolutely thrilled to be able to share their experiences.

This really tickled the teacher in me—they were so happy to share how they were applying the different principles of leadership and management in their own office. Since we had just spent two hours talking about the work they were doing and how it related to maternal and child health, I could very clearly see

that they were taking these leadership and management principles and making their interventions more systematic and transparent and efficient.

There are magic moments in the classroom where teachers can sense that the students really "get it" and can apply it to their lives, and this was the same sort of energy. They were engaged in it, they were applying it, and it was making their work easier. I had no direct stake in this—I don't work for that part of the organization. I just happened to be in the right place at the right time. But I was very proud to work for MSH that day. It was really a highlight of my time there and my nearly two years at MSH.

Q: You said earlier that people in the Peace Corps didn't know you were a librarian. Do you ever use that term at MSH? It's not part of your official title, which is knowledge manager.

I try to use "librarian" more often than "knowledge manager," which is frustrating to my supervisor because he really wants to drive home that I'm a knowledge manager. I think a lot of people feel that librarians are really old-fashioned, and they want to give them a more cutting-edge title like knowledge manager. That's fine—I do manage knowledge, and "knowledge manager" is a broader title that encompasses a lot more of my responsibilities than the term "librarian." But particularly when I'm working with our staff in the field, and if it's someone I don't know, I always say I'm the librarian.

I find that when some of our senior staff bump into me in the hallway and introduce me to someone new as the knowledge manager, they tend to stumble when they try to explain what I do. I'm always quick to point out that they should think of our library, and of me as the librarian. I think people understand these terms a lot more readily than they understand the concept of knowledge manager. The word "librarian" really speaks to what I do, and what my team does, within the broader context of knowledge management. **SLA**