

Librarians create haven for sick children

Carolyn Hoffman, ALIA publishing

In 1994 the father of a young heart patient at the Royal Alexandria Hospital for Children commented to his work colleagues that one thing the hospital lacked was an adequate selection of books for its patients.

His workplace was Scholastic Australia and his comment, 'It is difficult for the hospital to provide enough books for the children,' was taken seriously.

Three years later, on 17 August 1997, the Book Bunker opened at the New Children's Hospital in Sydney. The NCH is Australia's largest and most modern children's hospital and the Book Bunker, a unique in-hospital library, is an Australian — and most likely a world — first.

A haven for children who must spend long periods of time in the hospital, the appropriately named Book Bunker offers patients a taste of 'normal childhood'. They can pick out a new book or two, listen to stories, explore the latest CD-ROMs and talk to other children in an inviting, contemporary and interesting environment that is both a refuge and escape, completely removed from the realities of daily medical treatment.

Leonie Sweeney of Scholastic Australia, who was the driving force behind the Book Bunker project and remains the manager of the library, says that from the beginning the idea was to create a fun, modern and interesting space, filled with the most recent releases, CD-ROMs and computer programs. 'Let's face it', she said, 'if you are dealing with children and you are not right up there with what's new, you might as well not bother.'

Eye-catching colours, fluid contours, interesting cloud-like overhead shapes, spotlighting and fascinating textures create an ambience that is at once warm and intimate and yet creates an illusion of space



When the idea for the Book Bunker was first conceived, the staff at Scholastic set about gathering financial support, ideas and expertise. The project was considerably more difficult than they first imagined because no hospital had ever created anything quite like it before — breaking new ground proved unexpectedly challenging.

For example the library needed to provide for the special physical needs of its clients — children in wheelchairs, children with IV drips, or sight-impaired children. As well, the library needed to provide for the very different needs of children who have short hospital stays, intermittent or prolonged hospital stays.

Technology solved the problem of making the library available to bed-bound children. The children can access the entire library collection from a laptop computer networked via bedside computer ports to the Book Bunker inquiry software. In addition they have regular visits by the Book Bunker librarians and specially-selected books can be borrowed immediately from a Book Bunker trolley.

Very special clients, very special needs

Although the Book Bunker has a very respectable 20 000-book capacity, Leonie says that the staff must constantly monitor and evaluate which materials are being borrowed and which are not — all space is valuable and each book must earn its place. Recently, the staff have identified a number of key areas where the collection needs to be fortified. These include: books and materials in languages other than English; large print books; materials for adolescent clients; and lightweight, comic-style books.

'We are learning as we go', says Leonie, adding that they are particularly proud of what they have accomplished for their adolescent clients.

'We were advised when we first began that we should not concentrate on providing materials for the adolescent ward. We were told, "All adolescents are hard to turn on to books



A glowing neon sign draws children into the Book Bunker, the Scholastic Children's Library at the New Children's Hospital

and the children in this ward will be particularly difficult". In fact, the adolescent collection is very well used and we are building up a range of strong and appealing titles for our older readers,' she said.

Leonie and the Book Bunker staff have been in a process of constant discovery regarding their clients' needs. For example, she explained, they were very surprised to discover the extent of the demand for books such as the *Asterisk* and *Tin Tin* series. They then realised that children, not unlike adults, have reduced attention spans when very ill. Just as adults would prefer to read popular fiction or magazines, children also tend to prefer materials that provide maximum diversion for minimal effort.

Another challenge unique to in-hospital libraries is dealing with contamination issues. This is particularly important for children in the oncology ward who are exceptionally vulnerable to infection. Providing these children with books and other materials to entertain them while keeping them as safe as possible from infectious disease was determined to be a 'matter of timing'. The solution the Book Bunker staff arrived at was simple: when books arrive from the publishers, a selection of the most suitable books for the clients there at the time is sent on bulk loan to the oncology ward immediately — before more than one or two people have handled them. Once the children in the oncology ward have finished with them, the books are catalogued and placed within the Book Bunker proper. The opposite happens for children in the infectious diseases ward: once the books and materials have been part of the Book Bunker main collection for a reasonable length of time, they may be provided on bulk loan to the infectious diseases ward before being decommissioned.

The Book Bunker is currently staffed by twenty-one fully-qualified teacher-librarians and assistants who volunteer their time and expertise on a job-share basis. These staff members

are responsible for the day-to-day management of the library and have a wide range of discretionary powers. For example, not only are the Book Bunker staff members in a position to develop relationships with the children in the hospital, they are also in a position to react to their particular needs in very practical ways.

Leonie explains, 'Our mission at the Book Bunker is to fulfil the particular needs of our very special clients in the most positive ways. For some children their need is simply to be entertained and amused, for others it is to be relieved from excruciating boredom, and sadly, for many more it is to be distracted from pain and treatment. What we try to do most of all is provide security and comfort to these sick, fragile and often traumatised children.'

To this end the Book Bunker goes as far as having a policy which provides for the occasion when a child develops a special attachment for a particular book. 'If this happens', continues Leonie, 'our librarians have the authority to decommission the book and present it to the child as a gift. Every book has a plate that indicates who donated it. We simply place a stamp above the name of the donor that reads "A gift from ..." and give the book to the child.'

The opportunity to give children in hospital a welcome diversion or some happy memories is what motivates the volunteers, despite the occasionally heart-breaking nature of the work.

Gillian Barton, co-ordinator of the librarians, says, 'Every day I feel I am using my skills and experience to really make a difference to the lives of the sick children. It is very fulfilling and often moving.'

The librarians report to the hospital's volunteers management, which provides them with training and counselling.

Content issues

When the project was in the planning stages, Scholastic and the NCH decided that the key requirement of the Book Bunker was that it must be recreational and highly appealing and offer, at all times, the latest and best the children's publishing industry has to offer. But because the library is in a children's hospital environment Leonie was confronted with a very particular content issue: 'All parents have different ideas about when and what they wish their child to know about their illness, and the hospital respects these decisions. We needed to find a way of including books in the collection which might allow children to identify their own disease or condition but to ensure that they could not be accessed directly by them.'

However, an interesting phenomenon occurred when the Book Bunker was being set up: as boxes of books donated by Scholastic and other publishers began to arrive, the library staff was approached by a wide range of hospital workers. Counsellors, nurses, chaplains, doctors, social workers and physiotherapists were requesting books that could help them explain to patients and their friends, classmates and families what the child was going through and what could be expected of life in the future.

This concept of counselling and education through children's literature will be further developed. The Book Bunker is now actively building up a collection of what Leonie termed 'issues books' which can be used by carers to explain treatments and illnesses to children. Certain issues books of a particularly sensitive nature are housed separately from the main collection and are only made available through a parent, counsellor or medical staff member. Others are contained within the main collection.

A special board of management will be set up comprising medical and children's literature specialists to govern the issues collection. And, in another world-first initiative, the NCH staff will not only use children's literature to counsel and educate, but will also document this use to create and publish a set of best-practice standards.

Support and commitment

The initial stock of the Book Bunker's books, CD-ROMs and cassettes was do-

nated by Australian children's book and multi-media publishers and many of these publishers continue to send the Book Bunker new releases to ensure that the library maintains its up-to-the-minute reputation.

The Curriculum Corporation supplies the Book Bunker's cataloguing information through its new SCISWeb and SCIS Downloading CD-ROM technology, while the NSW Department of Education and Training provided the library automation software.

The Book Bunker works closely with the Starlight Express Room, Radio Bed Rock and the Hospital School to provide children with entertainment: celebrity, author and illustrator visits, story readings and competitions.

If you would like to be a Book Bunker volunteer, contact Gilly Paxton at the NCH on telephone 02 9845 3568. The Book Bunker is always in need of dedicated, qualified librarians and would welcome any assistance.

The volunteer librarians are Gillian Barton, Tina Driver, Li Gin, Jan Eade, Laurel Bendrey, Gail Pertzelt, Judith Coleman, Jan Chudleigh, Diana Giacomelli, Christine Keys, Kerry Gonzales, Sue Collins, Mary-Ann Cartwright, Faye Wheatley, Kerry Croft, Cheryl Hall, Pamela Freeman, Sandra Bath, Carolyn Watt, Charmien Sugden and Beverley Hysset.

For more information on the Book Bunker, contact Leonie Sweeney phone 02 4328 3555. ■



Mem Fox reads to the child who started it all. Jenna Ward was the young heart patient whose father commented to his employer that there were insufficient books at the hospital