

EDITORIAL

Dermabase

At present, if you wish to undertake a bibliographic search or even obtain a published article, there are many ways to do this—some free, others on payment (sometimes just a nominal fee). This makes bibliographic searching more flexible and today you can locate the most diverse journals or books; some of which were hard to access until just a few years ago. Similarly, when we start working with computers, all sorts of facilities and comforts are now available to help us get to work with no great hurdles to overcome. There are devices of many kinds and we can choose the one we think will meet our needs, and the operating system and a range of programs are either pre-installed or easy to install. A varied range of support and maintenance services are on offer, professionals and technical experts exclusively trained in computer science are on hand, and the Internet provides even greater ease.

In the 1980s when our first ideas for a bibliographic data program began to take shape, computer science had not yet unleashed its influence on young people, although many had had taken their first steps into this world with games machines such as Spectrum and Atari. Health professionals began to take a personal interest in computers and their possible applications to medicine and private practice. In hospitals, computers were only available in clinical anatomy departments, laboratories, or research centers, and were often managed by technical rather than medical staff. The idea of a clinician using a computer for scientific ends seemed pure science fiction, and the use of a “portable” computer (weighing 6 to 10 kg at the time) appeared especially unrealistic. Some of us had a rudimentary desktop computer at home—often little more than an intelligent typewriter as more complex programs were nonexistent—and they were often used by our children to play games known as “Space Invaders” the simplicity of which would barely even impress a 5 year-old today.

The features of the gargantuan machines of 1981-1984 were laughable; 604 kB of data storage capacity on a tape cassette and no hard disk (Amstrad CPC464), or a 128 kB capacity on a diskette (ZX-Spectrum and Commodore 64). In many cases they used 3.5” or 5.25” diskettes, or both, and storage was commonly in magnetic form, with all its implicit security and data retention issues. Computers containing a hard disk only began to appear from 1984, starting with 10 MB of memory and exceeding 230 MB by the end of the 1980s. Most of these were in the IBM range—the PC 8088, 8088XT and the PS 230, 250, and

280. These used a type of optical storage technology that meant they had to be loaded with 10 or more disk drives that created many associated problems, and the cost of these machines was frequently prohibitive.

Microprocessors (the real brains of computers), produced by Intel (Intel 8086, 8088), were first used between 1979 and 1981, leading to dizzying development in information technology. The process accelerated further in 1993 with the Intel Pentium—a fifth generation of microprocessor that worked up through the Pentium II and III, IV and V; this last processor with a double or quadruple processor (Dual Core).

These advances in hardware were accompanied in the 1990s with the appearance of a variety of software that became more popular and made computers more user-friendly. Microsoft Windows opened the doors to many programs for databases, calculations, word-processing, presentations, etc. Following several trials, we chose the program Lotus Smartsuite and its Approach database. The choice was made on the basis that it was easy to manage, very intuitive, and, above all, because the database structure allowed for on-going modification.

We planned to use these “materials” to build an easily manageable database that would contain most of the useful data for different searches. We started by organizing data on the many films and albums we had at home, creating fields such as: title, actors, director, country, duration, subject, date, and keywords. This system allowed us to search by field or by various fields at the same time. We learned how to manage the program, the ease with which fields could be added or removed, and especially the many advantages of a quick and easy search. The creation of this program coincided with my stage as librarian in the Spanish Academy of Dermatology and Venereology (AEDV) and I used the same program was used (with slight modifications) for the books in the AEDV library, indexing 536 books by 1994. This database was left at the AEDV to be continued by later librarians, but we believe it fell into disuse.

At that time, searching for bibliographical references was a complex process and was dependent upon laboratories () or the almost inaccessible libraries of various medical centers. As a result, we began a new project to apply the program to dermatology, beginning with a relatively new journal closely linked to our line of daily work (occupational dermatology and contact dermatitis). We chose *Contact Dermatitis* because we had the full set.

This journal was first officially published in 1975, and we filled in our first entry: *Contact dermatitis at a spinal injuries centre*, by Margaret M. Walshe; later, on finding previous issues of this publication, known as the *Contact Dermatitis Newsletter*, we entered all the articles published from its inception in January 1967, and the first article by N. Hjorth: *Perfume Dermatitis*.

This experience and the satisfaction of the good outcomes encouraged us to begin indexing *Actas Dermosifiliográficas* from 1968, using the issues available in our dermatology service library; once the efficacy and ease of searching was proven, we became even more ambitious and decided to index the whole of *Actas Dermosifiliográficas* from the first issue. During that period, I was librarian for the Board of Directors chaired by Professor Armijo, and this allowed me—with the valuable contributions of Milagros [Secretary] of the AEDV—to review all past issues of the journal until the work was complete.

Entering the details of the first article: *Curas con alquitrán de hulla en varias dermatosis*, by Juan de Azúa, was a moving experience. This sensation was repeated during the data entry process when we were able to see how dermatology had developed and how our antecedents in the dermatology of the early 20th century had made accurate diagnoses and developed sophisticated treatments with such limited resources, often leading to the cure of the illnesses. This interest may have slowed the work somewhat, but many of the articles were so interesting we were forced to read them carefully. We observed how often issues and sections of dermatology we believed to have been discovered in recent years by foreign authors were magnificently described by our predecessors, although no references are ever made to them in Spanish publications.

This enormous task was made easier with the help of dermatology residents who worked on rotation in the service—and special mention is due to Dr Elfida Sánchez, who developed great fondness for the task of reviewing *Actas Dermosifiliográficas*. Of course there were many difficulties to overcome; in the early articles, for instance, authors used either their first surname or their second but not both, contrary to normal Spanish usage. Some made no mention of their given name even for well-known contributors such as Gay Prieto (Gay), Gómez Orbaneja (Orbaneja), Sánchez Covisa (Covisa), etc. We were thus forced to make corrections for the sake of uniformity. Also, there were no keywords and we were forced to insert these in order to facilitate the searches. To do this, we entered one word from the title and then grouped the diseases into large sections according to their etiology under the following sections: venereal, parasitic, tumors, cancer, etc,

aiming for a minimum of 3 or 4 key words per article. It was hard work, tedious at times, but something I would recommend all young dermatologists do. The articles provide extensive knowledge of the history of dermatology in Spain and also scientific validation of the predecessors we often fail to cite in the many international publications produced in Spain.

However, 2 years of hard work created a large database that was soon known by many dermatologists asking us to search both for articles to support contributions to publications and authors needing evidence for their curriculum vitae. Dr. Sánchez Yus and Dr. Requena made especially important contributions at this stage: as directors of *Actas Dermosifiliográficas*, every time they received a contribution that mentioned no papers published in this journal, they asked me to perform a search and, if they found a paper that had not been cited, they returned the paper to the author in order for it to be included.

Some 7500 references were entered in 1992 and the program continued until 2007 when some 9200 references were entered. All the articles from the beginning of *Medicina Cutánea* and *Piel* were also included, and by 2007 the program held a total of 13 802 references.

The program was such a success that AEDV and Masson—the publishers of *Actas Dermosifiliográficas* at the time—asked for the program to be made available to the publishing house and academics; presenting us in return with a laptop computer to help us continue to update DERMABASE, as the program was now called, in the AEDV headquarters. This program is now available on the AEDV website for all types of searches on materials up to 1999.

This bibliographic program has been extended to other publications such as *Medicina del Trabajo*, as well as *Contact Dermatitis* and *Dermatitis* up until 2007, with a total of more than 20 000 indexed articles.

We also use a variation of this program as the database for our occupational dermatology department, including a larger number of fields (58) and more complex search facilities.

We have gained immense satisfaction from the fact that a program we started building in our spare time for no given scientific purpose is now proving to be of scientific use and—with just a few modifications—has been used for bibliographic searches within the AEDV environment.

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