

Preface

I am extremely grateful to have had the opportunity to create this thoroughly revised second edition. Like its predecessor, it is intended to be read from start to finish, away from the computer. This book is not intended as a replacement for the excellent MEDLINE tutorials on the Web (see Appendix A), the classes that are offered by most medical libraries, or the on-line help that comes with PubMed, Ovid, and other interfaces to MEDLINE. PubMed's on-line tutorial is an especially good complement to this book, which has a more ambitious agenda—the cultivation of an informed and thoughtful approach to searching in MEDLINE.

The search examples in this book reflect my two main interests: the clinical use of drugs for common health problems and public health strategies to reduce the burden of these problems. They are only examples, selected to illustrate how MEDLINE works. I am painfully aware of how quickly a book like this becomes dated and have attempted to place time-sensitive information in Appendix A, which is also on the Web (www.ashburypress.com/medline/resources). As in the past, the Web version will be periodically updated. MEDLINE is but one of many tools for learning about biomedical knowledge, so this edition's Appendix A has been expanded to include a section on sources of health information on the Web. It is but a small sampling; suggestions are welcomed! As previously, Medical Subject Headings appear as SMALL CAPS.

MEDLINE's basic features have changed somewhat in the half-dozen years since the publication of the first edition, but to a large extent it is the same remarkable bibliographic database that it has always been. More significant changes have occurred (and will no doubt continue to occur) in its most widely used interface,

PubMed. PubMed provides access to citations in MEDLINE (the primary component of PubMed), to citations from journals that are outside of MEDLINE's scope, to citations that are in the process of being indexed for MEDLINE, and to citations that were indexed before MEDLINE's existence. PubMed's other features, including its capacity for linkages to other Web-based resources and its capacity for mapping entry terms to MEDLINE data elements, are described in Chapters 1 and 2. More information on the difference between MEDLINE and PubMed can be found on a National Library of Medicine Fact Sheet (see page 100).

PubMed has made it easier to search in MEDLINE. Nevertheless, the popularization of powerful Web search engines like Google has changed our standards for finding information. Our expectations are higher, and our patience is lower. We are accustomed to using Google for queries that take far less than a minute. MEDLINE can be fast, but it is a different beast. Effective searches require a little planning, and refinement as well. The Web is completely unorganized; MEDLINE is elegantly organized. Google takes us first to the most widely cited and frequently used sources that match our query. MEDLINE places no premium on the popularity of its citations; it expects us to ask carefully, unambiguously—and it provides the means for doing so.

My first experience with MEDLINE was in 1971. I was a young clinical pharmacist and assistant professor at the University of California, San Francisco (UCSF) School of Pharmacy. As a member of the Library Committee, I was among the first to learn that the National Library of Medicine was offering free MEDLINE searches for faculty. My query—a broad request for citations concerning drug therapy for arthritis—produced a printout on fan-folded paper that was approximately twelve inches high. It was too large to be helpful, but I was impressed by the resources that had been used to produce it. The printout sat in my office for many years, serving as a kind of totem. Over the years, I edited several editions of a multi-authored textbook on the clinical use of drugs, using the printed *Index Medicus* as my guide to journal articles. Then,

in 1983, I bought my first personal computer, and, with it, a 1200 baud modem (fast for that era). I subscribed to an evening version of Dialog, which provided MEDLINE access for \$48 per hour, half the daytime rate. Eventually, I took a several-day course provided by the National Library of Medicine (NLM) at UCLA. With the help of several binders and reference books produced by the NLM, and an excellent book on command-line MEDLINE searching (the late Susan Feinglos's *MEDLINE: A Basic Guide to Searching*, 1985), my search skills improved. The training course allowed subsequent access to a now-defunct MEDLINE server at the NLM for a much lower connect rate. My many searches were enormously valuable in writing a book for older users of prescription drugs, published in 1988. By the 1990s, I had free access to MEDLINE through a dial-up connection to the library at UCSF (and by then my modem was faster). MEDLINE was my constant support in a career transition to public health. During a postdoctoral fellowship in alcohol research at the University of California, Berkeley School of Public Health, MEDLINE was one of my main tools. Inspired by the usefulness of my experiences, I resolved to write a book about MEDLINE itself, independent of any specific interface. This objective was realized with the publication of the first edition of this book, in 1999. That was two years after the launch of PubMed, which introduced free MEDLINE on the Web.

I am indebted to my colleagues at the San Francisco Department of Public Health, who graciously supported the part-time schedule that allowed me to work on this project, to medical librarians and colleagues who read drafts of this and the previous edition, to the NLM, and to my family. Judith Bishop, Michael Delander, Jan Glover, Mary Keane, Bob Liner, Kelly Near, David Owen, Jessica Warner, and my wife Betty provided many helpful suggestions. Any faults are my own.