

SPECIAL ARTICLE

ECHO: The Joint Mission Hospital Equipment Board Limited

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The Joint Mission Hospital Equipment Board (JMHEB) now more universally known as ECHO was established in 1966. The concept of a coordinated charitable agency to supply the specialized medical needs of mission and charity hospitals overseas was the vision of an ex-missionary doctor with the support of the Conference of British Missionary Societies, under whose charitable umbrella the organization began life. The original aim was to coordinate and supply the medical equipment needs of mission hospitals overseas by utilizing the vast quantities of equipment becoming available at that time through the programme of re-equipping National Health Service hospitals. Offers of equipment poured in, as did requests from overseas. As a non-profit making charity with limited capital support of member agencies (UK missionary societies and charities) ECHO had from the very early years to become self supporting. Equipment was sold to cover the running costs, yet items were on average available to hospitals overseas at about a quarter of the comparable commercial cost. From these early beginnings has grown an organization now capable of supplying all the complex medical needs of a modern hospital. Large stocks of medical equipment have been built up over the years, both new, unused and reconditioned with a continuing dedication towards an improvement in the standards of equipment supplied to meet a changing pattern of need, e.g. sophisticated items such as X-ray units and hydraulic operating tables are factory reconditioned by specialist manufacturers to a high quality for a cost often below one-third of the commercial new price.

JMHEB became an independent registered charity in 1972, and in 1973 adopted the trading name of ECHO (Equipment for Charity Hospitals Overseas) to symbolize the broad and evolving role of the organization.

Total annual turnover of £6000 in 1967 had grown to 3.5 million in 1982 and by the end of that year ECHO was in contact with over 1600 hospitals and medical units in 119 different countries. The annual number of consignments sent overseas was nearly 2000 totalling approximately 1500 tons of vital supplies. The full and part time staff now number 55 and these include skills in equipment and pharmaceutical purchasing, order interpretation and selection, packing, export documentation, book-keeping and financial control. ECHO is directed by two permanent officers in the medical and administration fields and broad policy is governed by an honorary Council of Management comprising representatives elected annually from member organizations, together with *ex officio* councillors selected from commerce and government.

Pharmaceuticals

In response to demand, pharmaceuticals were added to the product list in 1975. Having established by market research a basic list of more commonly used generic (non-branded) drugs, dramatic savings were achieved by the bulk buying and stocking of tablets by the million. An increased range of pharmaceutical products covering the majority of the endemic diseases of developing countries were later offered as the demand grew. Today ECHO's pharmaceutical supplies are purchased from many sources in the UK and Europe. All are manufactured to the high British Pharmaceutical standard. A permanent stock of over 250 million tablets, capsules, ointments, etc., and several million injections is held—sufficient to meet a regular demand from overseas and for national disasters as they occur. It is interesting to note that the biggest growth in the ECHO Pharmaceutical Programme has been in the supply of drugs needed for the treatment of leprosy, and by 1980 some 260 million dapsone tablets were being manufactured annually for ECHO for world leprosy needs. The newer antileprosy drugs such as clofazimine and rifampicin have been made available by the manufacturers for distribution through ECHO at considerably reduced prices.

The rural health centre and village clinic

Most concerned authorities agree that health care in developing countries should be tailored to suit the particular needs of the community. Many developing countries have a common characteristic of rural communications. It is therefore likely that the medical needs of such rural areas can best be met by providing small compact health centres instead of expensive traditional hospitals, only economical in areas of dense population. With these considerations in mind, ECHO has evolved full basic equipment kits for a five-department Rural Health Centre comprising: examination room, treatment room, minor operations theatre, gynaecological/family planning clinic and a laboratory. In 1983, this kit can be provided for approximately £5000, with the equipment and medical software for the more basic village clinic for a little over £800.

Packing and freight

In 1974, faced with escalating shipping costs, ECHO set up its own packing and shipping department. It now handles not only ECHO supplies but also the freight needs of many member charities at cost. Wooden crates and boxes are made on the premises at 50% of commercial cost.

Appropriate Technology for Health

This somewhat grandiose title given to a recently created department of the World Health Organization describes something that missionaries have through necessity been doing for years, i.e. adapting available resources.

In the context of health care the latest expensive technological aids to diagnosis may be totally irrelevant in an underdeveloped country. ECHO is helping to make available basic items of equipment; for example, a company long-established in equipment manufacture now makes for ECHO a simple operating table in lightweight alloy, incorporating many of the essential features of the more expensive hydraulic table but at about a tenth of the cost. A whole range of descriptive leaflets are available of Appropriate Technology Medical Equipment specially manufactured for ECHO, including several which use car batteries for electric supply.

The future

The concept of a professional agency supplying (without profit motive) the medical needs of those responsible for developing health care in the Third World is now well established. For the future our plans are as follows.

EQUIPMENT

Continuing the development of the service to supply the equipment needs of charity hospitals and the initiatives of developing and supplying equipment kits for health centres and village clinics. Recently a new technical department has been opened led by a highly trained medical physics technician to ensure that there will always be a technical back-up and advisory service available to the overseas charity hospital.

PHARMACEUTICALS

ECHO has achieved a major breakthrough in the planned goal of a worldwide bulk supply of high quality generic medicines available cheaply on demand. The service continues to expand, whilst every encouragement is being given to the setting up of local production and distribution services overseas.

FREIGHT

A compact organization exists now to service the foreseen expansion. Cooperation between hospitals overseas to achieve larger group orders is now being actively encouraged by ECHO and will bring further savings with the benefits of containerization.

THE HEADQUARTERS

With the move in January 1979 to integrated and enlarged premises in Ewell, Surrey, enough working space was available to cope with developments foreseen in the immediate future. The larger premises have enabled better mechanical handling techniques to be introduced thus speeding up the packing and despatch of increasing numbers of overseas consignments. Now, however, a more permanent headquarters must be found and due allowance made for this in the capital funding programme.

ECHO DEVELOPMENT TRUST

ECHO's future role in supplying the needs of the world's medically under-privileged is now clear—the pace of development must be determined by the availability of capital resources, as expansion dictated by need must be allied with commercial prudence. The expansion programme has been costed as accurately as prevailing economic conditions will allow and a separate charity 'The ECHO Development Trust' set up to administer the capital funding needs. The programme to reduce human suffering is ambitious, the capital underwriting cost is not. Further details of this or any of the ECHO services are available on request.