present day. It includes several items from The Indexer. Rather spoilt by poor production.


SOFTWARE REVIEW

INDEXER. Produced by American Medical Association; obtainable from National Library of Medicine, Bethesda, Maryland, USA.$3500 (excluding MeSH file).

The product provided by the American Medical Association has been difficult to assess for several reasons: it is closely linked to the preparation of that specific association’s journals (although it could be used for other text); it is linked to the actual machine-readable manuscripts, and is built around the exploitation of MeSH subject-headings (although another thesaurus could be used). Furthermore, the demonstration came with one (completed) file for one specific journal: Journal of the American Medical Association (JAMA).

The screen layout is good, and most of the commands are entered via the function keys—the purpose for which is displayed at the top and bottom of the screen. Other commands are submitted via the cursor and the enter key. The colour on the main display is an acceptable blue: on other displays red has been excessively used as a background. Help is readily available either in response to doing the wrong thing or via the first function key (the industry norm).

The system requires a fair amount of space, at least 530k of memory, and is the most demanding in terms of configuration that I have encountered (and my experience stretches to expert systems). Twenty-nine files need to be accessed concurrently. The system comes up quickly on a 486 machine, but sorting the subject index is annoyingly slow. One suspects that operation on a 286 machine would be painful and 20 mByte of hard disk would be only marginally adequate for the complete system with 4 mByte of MeSH subject headings.

The provision of a controlled vocabulary might be expected to enhance indexer performance, but there is no evidence to suggest that the software is not useful within the framework of the American Medical Association, although it is possible to query the extent to which the tool enhances indexer performance (as distinct from productivity within that specific framework). The software is moderately simple to use, and I could get into (and, more importantly, out of) the system without a detailed examination of the accompanying text. Sometimes such indolence is rewarded by having to switch off the machine and hoping that one has escaped from the jaws of the system.

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The most negative factor is the price: $3500, not including the MeSH file. Which organizations would be prepared to make such a large financial outlay? They would have to be big, and would probably have to possess a list of subject headings. Presumably, the ideal purchasers would be other medical organizations.

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