

*A few years after graduating, Kirsten Reimer was offered two jobs on the same day and had to decide which one to take. That decision, more than twenty years ago, has led her to have the unusual distinction of being the head of the world's largest library on torture. SHEILA PHAM reports.*

# The World's Largest Library on Torture

“Everybody needs a job, right?” she says, laughing. “Back then I asked myself, did I want to be a part of business? Or did I want to be part of human rights and the fight against torture? There was no doubt in my mind that I wanted to be part of the human-rights movement back in 1992 – and I’ve been happy for it since,” she says.

The library she manages is located on the ground floor of DIGNITY, the Danish Institute Against Torture. It was officially launched on 1 October 1987 and has been collecting everything possible about torture and related topics for about thirty years. The library has two full-time staff members and two part-time students, and between them they manage the world's biggest collection on torture.

The goal of the library is to assist in disseminating existing knowledge about torture, its consequences and the means to rehabilitate people who have been tortured. The library gathers as much as possible from around the world, and the working language of the library is English.

“Eighty five to ninety percent is in English. It’s a research library so we try to gather most of what’s published with an emphasis on the scientific literature. Where we can, we have translators and we transcribe it into English,” says Reimer.

“The databases and websites are in English. However, we have a database portal where you can search worldwide in our collection and the layout of the portal is translated into Danish, English, Norwegian, German and Arabic because we have a lot of collaborating partners in the Middle East.”



The database portal that the library maintains is its most important tool, providing more than 30,000 references to reports, newsletters, articles from small journals, pictures, movies, and recordings, including many unique entries.

The library's resources are mostly used by people living in Denmark but it regularly receives requests from around the world. Recently Reimer has dealt with inquiries from Australia, Egypt, Italy, Jordan, Myanmar and the United States. These requests mostly come from students, journalists, human-rights activists, researchers and healthcare professionals.

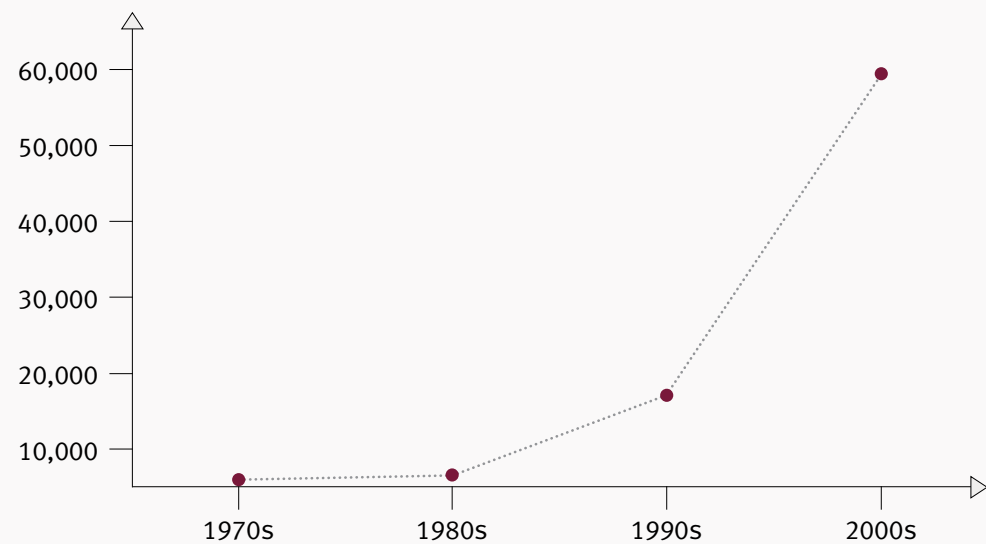
"They have all kinds of questions. They could be people working in centres, they could be GPs, or they could be lawyers – asking for material that could help them where they have cases of refugees who are being threatened to be thrown out of countries. We're also

working with the European Court of Human Rights," says Reimer.

One of the key challenges the library is currently facing, as is the case with libraries all around the world, is the increasing amount of work required to digitise information and navigate complex copyright issues, particularly as the number of torture-related publications over the years has grown exponentially.

"Back in the early 70s and 80s there were very few publications made on torture," she explains.

"There were some historical items and there were some books about medieval methods. But there was no actual evidence about what is torture, what it does to people and how we can try to prevent it. But that changed in the late 90s, and after the millennium there was an increase."



**Table 1.** Results of records from controlled searches performed in the following databases by DIGNITY library: ProQuest Research library, IBSS, Medline, PsychINFO, PILOTS databases



Reimer took over as head of the library three years ago. Around that same time she completed a masters degree in information science and interactive communication. It was important for her to upgrade her skills, in part to keep pace with the dramatic changes that have occurred during her career. These days even the very concept of what librarians do is being redefined.

"The role of the library and librarians are just as important but different. We are the intermediaries trying to disseminate the information about the different resources which are, yes, existing online instead of physical.

"We have to be the gateway, we have to be the motivators, the inspiration about where to look and how to look. People think they know how to find things but they don't, they only find a little corner of the existing knowledge. They don't know

it's actually ten times or a hundred times as much as they have found!

"I think that is the future role of the librarian: to inspire and to lay out information online so it's easily found."

Regardless of the way things are changing, the classic training that librarians like Reimer receive is still important, particularly when dealing with a complex subject area such as torture which encompasses the sciences as well as the humanities.

"What a librarian does first and foremost is listen. It's very important for a librarian to be able to listen. And listen between the lines because people don't express what they actually need," she says.

"You have to go into a dialogue with them – it's called 'user-librarian dialogue'... and you don't get the chance to do that if they're just googling." R