4-3: Implementing an inventory management programme

Implementation steps

In establishing an inventory control programme there are a number of factors to consider. A system should be designed so that the laboratory can closely monitor the condition of all supplies and reagents, know what quantities are available and be alerted when there is a need to reorder.

The following are important steps for implementation.

- Assign responsibility—without this, nothing may get done.
- Analyze the needs of the laboratory.
- Establish the minimum stock needed for an appropriate time period.
- Develop needed forms and logs.
- Establish a system for receiving, inspecting and storing supplies.
- Maintain an inventory system in all storage areas, and for all reagents and supplies used in the laboratory.

Analyze needs

A laboratory needs a process for analyzing its needs for materials and for determining how many kits for a particular test should be on hand.

The laboratory should make a list of all the tests it performs and identify all the supplies and reagents that are needed for each test. It is wise to use all available information to help estimate the usage of supplies and reagents for the period of time between ordering new materials. The information necessary for analyzing needs includes:

- a complete description of each item used;
- the package count or number of units in which the item is supplied (e.g. a kit can include 12 tests or 100 tests, and pipette tips can be packaged as 100 per box or 1000 per box);
- approximate usage per month (quantification, e.g. 6 boxes used per month);
- the priority or importance level the item has in doing the work of the laboratory (e.g. used every day or only once a month?);
- length of time required to receive a delivery (will the order take a day, week or month to arrive?);
- storage space and conditions (will a bulk order use too much storage space? Does the item require storage in a refrigerator?).

4-7: Monitoring inventory

Continuous monitoring of inventory

Procedures should be developed and put in place for continuous monitoring of the inventory. To ensure this is done effectively:

- assign the responsibility for this task to an appropriate person or persons—someone must be in charge;
- be sure that all supplies and reagents in the laboratory are covered by the system and maintain inventory management in all of the storage areas;
- conduct weekly physical counts of reagents and supplies in order to check the system, and as a part of the monitoring process;
- make sure that all records relevant to inventory management are updated and maintained.

Computerized inventory management advantages and drawbacks

In many laboratories, a simple computerized system can be set up for management of inventory. There are many advantages to using a computer. A computer will:

- keep track of the exact number of supplies and reagents on hand, as it can be updated daily;
- allow for good management of expiration dates—the system can be set up to alert when lot numbers are near the expiration date, and therefore use of resources can be optimized;
- generate statistics that will help when planning and making purchases;
- help manage the process for distributing reagents to satellite laboratories;
- ease the burden of inventory management.

Some drawbacks to setting up a computerized system are:

- an on-site computer is needed and it could be expensive to purchase
- staff using the system will need to be trained.