Computers to Help
In Birth Defect Fight

By Charles Petit
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A computer-based information network to help doctors treat baffling birth defects and to counsel parents of malformed children was revealed here yesterday.

The system, put together with the help of Massachusetts Institute of Technology scientists in the past four years at an estimated cost of $4 million to $5 million, was described by the March of Dimes Foundation as the most advanced medical information system of its type in the world.

Already there are an estimated 4000 computer terminals in hospitals and clinics across the country, and more in Europe, that could hook into the network. Within it are detailed descriptions and information on more than 1000 different birth defects.

One of the leading developers of the system, Dr. Daniel Bergsma, a professor of pediatrics at Tufts New England Medical Center, said the system was developed to help physicians "with the almost impossible task of diagnosing some birth defects."

Although often little can be done for the child in the case of most defects, knowing what a child has is critically important in advising anxious parents of the odds of another child being born with a similar malformation.

The computer itself, an IBM machine, is in Valley Forge, Pa., and is operated by the Center for Birth Defects Information Services at Tufts medical center in Boston. Users throughout the country and much of the world will be able to reach it via local telephone calls to link their computer terminals to the central machine.

For an estimated cost of $5, a physician will be able to have flashed to his screen or printed out a summary of what is known about the specific defect.

The system was unveiled at a press conference during the March of Dimes Birth Defects Conference here at the Sheraton Palace Hotel.

Bergsma, editor of the leading atlas of known birth defects, said books such as his are unable to keep up with the field. Every year, dozens of new, and usually extremely rare, birth defects are recognized, he said.

Eventually, the system is expected to help a doctor diagnose a defect from symptoms, and to detect possible outbreaks of usually rare defects.

"Today, doctors in scattered communities may be treating identical illnesses," Bergsma said, "and never know about each other. This should change that."

While the new system highlighted the conference here, attended by about 600 doctors and genetics counselors, the meeting also revealed that, with few exceptions, most birth defects are not treatable or respond only slightly.

The emphasis of the field is shifting heavily toward effective genetic counseling of persons born with birth defects and likely to have children and of parents who worry about future offspring after having one with a birth defect.

$6 Billion Approved

Washington

The House Appropriations Committee approved an increase in Agriculture Department spending of almost $6 billion yesterday, which is about $200 million more than President Carter wanted.