

WHAT'S SPECIAL ABOUT SPECIAL LIBRARIES? - THE PRACTICE ENVIRONMENT OF THE HEALTH SCIENCES LIBRARIAN*

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Introduction

The Medical Library Association recently celebrated its 100th birthday, making it one of the oldest library associations in the United States. MLA invited representatives from many other library associations to participate in our Centennial meeting. One of the comments voiced several times by visitors was that they did not realize how medically focused our members and meetings were. We were not only discussing the accessibility and delivery of health care information, but also the socioeconomic impacts of the health care environment on information delivery, aspects of telemedicine, the human genome project, medical terminology, the patient medical record and many other health issues that impact both the way in which we provide health information and the information that we provide. We were not only using the vocabulary specific to librarianship in our presentations to describe our research findings and programs, but also terms used by the medical profession. This shared vocabulary between professions is essential to efficient and accurate communication and is one factor that makes special librarians special.

Also, MLA's *Bulletin of the Medical Library Association (BMLA)* is influenced by journals of the health care professions. Whereas other library association journals have changed format or focus, the *Bulletin* is still a peer-reviewed research-oriented journal whose front covers are similar to that of the *Journal of the American Medical Association (JAMA)*. Our members publish research articles on the management of information in medical journals such as *JAMA*, *Academic Medicine*, or *Annals of Internal Medicine*. Likewise, members of the health care professions publish articles in the *BMLA*.

Health sciences librarians often work together in teams with groups of physicians, nurses, and others to provide information from the clinical literature to help in

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patient diagnosis and treatment. Librarians may also accompany medical staff on patient visits to identify special information needs of both the patient and physician in treating a disease.

The term “special” implies other differences that give “special” librarianship its distinctive quality, character, or identity. I believe that the distinctive identity of health sciences librarianship is derived from the special bond that health sciences librarians share with the health care professionals they serve. The practice of health sciences librarianship is strongly influenced by the health care profession’s mission to save lives and maintain the patient’s quality of life. The information needs of the health care professional determines how health sciences librarians practice their profession on a daily basis and creates a very challenging practice environment for the librarian. Our members’ practice needs have encouraged them to be leaders in the development of on-line databases such as MEDLINE and continuing education and certification programs for librarians. These practice needs also drive the programs and services of the Medical Library Association.

Database Development

The challenging practice environment in which the physician and health sciences librarian work promoted the development and distribution in the 1960’s of one of the first on-line databases, the MEDLARS database. The U.S. National Library of Medicine (NLM) and its librarians along with others created the MEDLARS system which eventually evolved into a number of specialized databases such as MEDLINE and TOXLINE to serve the medical community. This focus on a subject specialization, in this case medicine, enabled the growth and development of extraordinary information resources in the medical area. In 1997, NLM opened up access to medical information to a wider audience when NLM and MLA jointly announced that NLM’s databases would be made available free-of-charge over the Internet via Internet PUBMED and GRATEFUL MED. Health sciences librarians continue to promote open and free access to health care information for the medical professionals and patient population in a variety of ways. Most recently, MLA members successfully kept the journal of the National Cancer Institute a part of our federal depository program, enabling libraries to keep the journal available in their collections.

Continuing Education

The research-intensive medical profession has always emphasized the need for continuing education, requiring physicians to be recertified in their medical specialties on a regular basis. This lifelong learning is critical to the medical field

as new therapies and drugs are discovered and new technologies are introduced. Similarly, health sciences librarians recognized the need for more intensive subject specific training for their specialty than was offered by the graduate library schools. They also needed to keep their knowledge current in the same way as the physicians they served. To meet this need, MLA began to offer continuing education (CE) courses in the 1950's at the association's annual meetings. In 1990, MLA published *Platform for Change* (1), our educational policy statement. *Platform* detailed the roles and responsibilities that MLA, NLM, the library schools, employers, and most importantly, the individual play in professional lifelong learning. Today, CE courses are offered at both the national annual meeting and at the chapter meetings. In 1997, MLA had almost 6,000 participants take part in MLA-sponsored educational programs. In 1998, over 1,000 people took CE courses at the association's annual meeting.

Over the past few years, MLA has been producing satellite teleconferences to bring continuing education programs to the local area. In September we will carry this a step further by piloting our teleconference on evidence-based medicine over the Internet via realvideo as well as via satellite to bring courses directly to a librarian's desktop.

Certification

The health sciences librarian, as a member of the health care community of professionals, also had a need to be formally recognized for continuing education beyond the MLS. This need parallels the requirement of the physician and other health care professionals to be recertified on a periodic basis. MLA developed its certification program in 1948 to help health sciences librarians document their continuing education and other professional activities like the certification programs of associations who serve members of the health care community. MLA's certification program for health sciences librarians changed in the 1970's. To be certified, a librarian had to pass a competency examination. In the late 1980's, this program evolved into the Academy of Health Information Professionals or AHIP. All members of the Academy carry the designation "AHIP" after their names. Although an examination is no longer given, the certification program now documents the continuing education efforts of our members through coursework, publications, teaching, and involvement in other professional activities. Promoting their membership in the Academy helps health sciences librarians gain recognition among health care professionals who are very familiar with the necessity of certification and licensure programs in their own professions.

Impacts on the Profession

Health care is being driven by two strong forces in the U. S. today. The continually changing technologies impact both the practice of medicine and the practice of librarianship. The changes in the delivery of healthcare in the U.S. have also had a major impact on the way that medicine is practiced. This environmental volatility has led to less job security for health sciences librarians.

Other factors affecting health sciences librarians today besides new technologies and changes in the delivery of health care are the increasing availability of health information to the public, institutional accreditation issues, and ethical concerns.

The increasing availability of health information over the Internet has put more information, both good and bad, in the hands of consumers and patients. This has encouraged people to play a greater role in making decisions about their healthcare treatment options. Historically, health sciences librarians have served only health care professionals. However, as the U.S. health care environment has changed with its emphasis on consumer and patient health education and the accessibility of health information over the Internet, health sciences librarians are becoming more involved in providing consumer health information, either through the hospital or university medical library, special consumer health centers, or by working cooperatively with public librarians or community service agencies in their local areas. Over the last ten years, health sciences librarians have had to develop expertise in searching the Internet to locate and provide quality health information to the health care professions and, increasingly, to the public. This is not surprising since the Internet is a factor in all librarians' lives today. However, since it is estimated that two-thirds of the people who have used the Internet have sought health information there, the health sciences librarian has been on the leading edge of this technology. In recognition of this expansion of our members roles and responsibilities, MLA adopted a policy statement on the librarian's role in the provision of consumer health information and patient education (2). We have also published a consumer health brochure "Deciphering Medspeak", which defines some common medical terms, translates abbreviations often found on prescriptions, and provides information on recognizing authoritative health websites. These brochures are being distributed by hospital libraries, academic health centers, consumer and patient health libraries, and in physicians' offices.

Sometimes we work for organizations that may not view libraries as central to the success of the organization's strategic plan. This lack of perceived value of the health sciences librarianship has resulted in loss of jobs for librarians, particularly in hospital libraries. It has also meant that librarians are competing with other

professions such as information systems managers or those who specialize in medical informatics for information positions in their institutions. Health sciences librarians have had to gain additional knowledge in adapting and using new technologies to provide information services to a client base that is expanding beyond physicians, students, academic researchers to include patients and consumers. MLA and the National Library of Medicine continue to provide a range of continuing education opportunities in these areas. Those health sciences librarians who are keeping up with the changes and have a flexible vision of their roles and responsibilities within the organization have been given greater responsibility, greater recognition, and increased salaries. Also, health sciences librarians who have obtained additional knowledge and skills are able to move into other information-related professions within the institution such as chief information officer or establish their own information firms providing health information on a contractual basis to health care facilities or to the public on a fee-for-service basis. Two years ago, MLA inaugurated National Medical Librarians Month to help members of the profession promote the value-added they contribute to quality patient care.

The institutions in which health sciences librarians work are often accredited by outside agencies such as the Joint Commission on the Accreditation of Healthcare Organizations (JCAHO) or the National Committee for Quality Assurance (NCQA). The emphasis in the accreditation report on knowledge-based or the clinical information that the librarians provides is sometimes minimal, but accreditation requirements can be crucial to the survival of the librarian within the hospital or academic health center. MLA works with these outside agencies to be sure that the information management function is recognized as essential to the operation of the institution and that the professional librarian is perceived by the institution as being integral to the information management function. Over the past five years, the JCAHO has become an international organization, working with countries in Europe, the former Soviet Union, and Africa to develop accreditation standards for each country. As time goes on it will be interesting to see what influence these standards have on the practice of health sciences librarianship in these countries.

An area of expertise for health science librarians that has grown in importance is the ability to instruct or teach. This qualification is found in an increasing number of ads for professional positions, no matter what other responsibilities that that position entails. Instructing the health care professional in the use of databases to find medical information has been a part of the health sciences librarian's job for a number of years. Now the health sciences librarian may be responsible for state-of-the-art instructional labs used by medical students and faculty. According to

Asta(3) in the author's article about today's medical libraries in the *Annals of Internal Medicine*, "Medical librarians have also used their expertise in information services and audiovisual technology to launch telemedicine services and assist curriculum development at many medical schools." The increasing need for the health care professional to effectively use the Internet has required that librarians spend more time in instruction of all types and has demanded that they develop instructional web courses and other technologically advanced educational techniques to serve their constituencies.

Recognizing that the professionals we serve drive our profession, MLA adopted a code of ethics for health sciences librarians(4) describing goals and principles for ethical conduct in serving society, clients, our institutions, our profession, and ourselves. The Code recognizes that health sciences librarians have an obligation to the institution that they serve, but also an obligation to the patient to provide the best information they can to assist them in making informed decisions about their treatment options. Rothstein(5) stated in her article on ethics and the role of the medical librarian, "the librarian should provide the highest level of service, ensuring access to information, protecting confidentiality, and avoiding conflicts of interest." Sometimes there is a conflict between institutional goals and the impartial provision of information. In the U.S., some health science librarians have successfully lobbied their state legislatures to adopt "patients' bills of rights" to minimize these conflicts. Hospitals and medical centers have adopted interdisciplinary approaches to modern medical ethics and health care to address these issues in a broader way than before.

One final example demonstrates what is special about health sciences librarians. Over a holiday a couple of years ago, one of our members was listening to the radio. She heard a news bulletin about a terrible accident in which a child had been critically injured. She left her own family, went to the hospital library, and began a literature search on the child's condition. She provided the needed information about the injury to the emergency room staff and to the parents within a very short space of time. Her quick action resulted in a favorable patient outcome and better informed parents. This dedication or passion for the profession that health sciences librarians share with other health care professionals is what drives the people who chose to go into health sciences librarianship and makes them special librarians.

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