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Health Sciences Libraries

By Susan Bloomfield, Deborah Clark,
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INTRODUCTION

Maine's health care institutions, like those around the nation, have made many changes in the past several decades to adapt to the shifting health care environment. Service models have switched emphasis from inpatient to outpatient, with many hospitals building and staffing new types of outpatient facilities. Inpatients are sicker and lengths of stay are shorter, with declining reimbursement. Technological advances continue at an ever-increasing pace, with institutions needing to stay ahead of the curve to remain competitive in the market and deliver safe and effective patient care.

The explosion of knowledge and use of information technology has meant that hospitals now commit large amounts of money to develop the infrastructure for health information technology, often only slowly achieving efficiencies and realizing a return on their investments. Health care professionals are under extreme pressure to stay current with the ever-expanding knowledge base, but have less time to accomplish this. Recent state and federal health care reform has added another level of complexity.

As they grapple with these changes, the roles of health sciences librarians who manage the collections, services, and resources traditionally known as "the library" also have evolved. Today's health science librarians have a much different role from their predecessors. Librarians may continue to provide some traditional services such as literature searching, interlibrary loan, and classroom instruction. However, many of their daily activities do not resemble anything their counterparts performed a decade ago, and even those traditional

activities are more complex, specialized, and targeted to specific institutional goals and initiatives.

SUPPORTING CLINICIANS

Health sciences librarians serve as uniquely trained reference librarians who specialize in the research and dissemination of medical and health information. Their users include physicians, nurses, pharmacists, allied health professionals, corporations, students, patients, and community members. They work in teaching and nonteaching hospitals, outpatient clinics, university and college libraries, health care and biotechnology centers, and state and local government agencies. They are trained to assess the credibility of electronic and print information sources and to process that information appropriately for the patron—from specialized, professional briefings for rounds to a patient handout offered at a suitable reading level. (The sidebar shows the location of hospital-based health sciences libraries in Maine. There are also health sciences collections or libraries at a number of Maine's colleges and universities, research labs, and businesses.)

Health sciences librarians perform literature searches using countless references in all formats that include the latest evidence-based sources, including peer-reviewed print and online journals, electronic databases, textbooks, monographs, clinical trial reports, statistical reviews, authoritative web sites, and also enduring historic literature. Essentially, librarians know where to search, how to search, how to winnow, and how to deliver this material.

Hospital-based health sciences librarians, the focus of this article, play a crucial role in the delivery of patient care. Their work supports clinicians by keeping them informed of the latest evidence-based findings and treatments for specific conditions and circumstances. Health care providers rely heavily on health sciences librarians because they have little time to conduct systematic and meticulous information searches, and they often do not have the skills to do such searches. Most certainly do not have the knowledge of the scope of available resources. Many are still uncomfortable with technology or do not know how to use computers. And importantly, not all providers have access to desk- or laptop computers or mobile devices.

In many settings, if computers are available, they are shared, and their availability is fleeting.

Some librarians accompany clinicians on bedside rounds and ward meetings. Others are physically located in medical or research units. These “embedded librarians” are immediately available to field questions and collaborate with clinicians or researchers.

Additional services provided by health sciences librarians include acquiring professional articles for physicians’ continuing medical education credits and providing breaking news and article alerts for patrons of all disciplines. They help clinicians and students to prepare presentations; they support clinical teaching and lend research support for the development of practice guidelines. They assure that the most current medical literature is available in a variety of formats in their library collections. Health sciences librarians participate in or moderate journal clubs, regular meetings where professional literature is discussed and evaluated.

Professionals who choose to do their own research come to health sciences librarians to learn how to evaluate online references. Librarians promote and teach skills for evaluating web sites to clinicians, often on an individual basis. Source assessment, coupled with learning advanced Internet-searching skills, results in getting relevant information fast. Honing these skills increases confidence and subject-matter knowledge. The end result: highly-educated clinicians and improved patient care.

WORKING WITH PATIENTS AND CONSUMERS

Health sciences librarians are an important link to quality health information for patients and consumers. They provide current, accurate information on new diagnoses, medical tests, and treatment options, including prescription drugs and complementary therapies, supplying consumers with information in a

MAINE HEALTH SCIENCES LIBRARIES

**Aroostook Medical Center,
Presque Isle**

TAMC Health Sciences Library

Bridgton Hospital, Bridgton

Skillin Health Science Library

Cary Medical Center, Caribou

Health & Resource Library

**Central Maine Medical Center,
Lewiston**

Gerrish-True Health Sciences Library

**Dorothea Dix Psychiatric Center,
Bangor**

Behavioral Health Library

**Eastern Maine Medical Center,
Bangor**

Hadley Parrot Health Science Library

**Franklin Memorial Hospital,
Farmington**

Ben Franklin Center Library

Inland Hospital, Waterville

Medical Library

Maine Medical Center, Portland

Library

**MaineGeneral Medical Center,
Augusta**

Health Sciences Library

**MaineGeneral Medical Center,
Waterville**

Health Sciences Library

Mid Coast Hospital, Brunswick

Health Sciences Library

Pen Bay Medical Center, Rockport

Niles Perkins Health Science Library

**Redington-Fairview General Hospital,
Skowhegan**

Health Sciences Library

Rumford Hospital, Rumford

Health Science Library

**Southern Maine Medical Center,
Biddeford**

Health Sciences Library

St. Joseph Hospital, Bangor

Health Science Library

**St. Mary’s Regional Medical Center,
Lewiston**

Health Sciences Library

Stephens Memorial Hospital, Norway

Health Sciences Library

**Waldo County General Hospital,
Belfast**

Marx Library

variety of formats and at a level they can understand. Librarians also help people to evaluate the quality of online information so they can make better decisions about their healthcare and lifestyle choices, thereby helping consumers avoid wasteful spending on ineffective and possibly unsafe remedies.

Health sciences librarians actively contribute to their hospitals through community health education outreach. They may set up an information booth on preventing infections at a hospital flu clinic; plan a class on healthy eating for seniors with the hospital dietitian; or attend a parents’ night event at a local elementary school to promote information resources on child health. Some assist in grant-writing projects related to public health initiatives; others develop resources for

local immigrant populations to help them to navigate an unfamiliar health care system.

Promoting patient engagement and shared decision making between patients and their health care providers is of growing importance in health care today. Patients are encouraged to access their electronic medical records (EMRs) to maintain a continuing dialogue with their health care providers. Medical practices are following their patients more closely to better manage chronic conditions and prevent unnecessary and high-cost emergency department visits. Health sciences librarians support these initiatives by supplying patients and providers with information to promote better patient self-care and make the best treatment decisions. Now with the use of the EMR, librarians can also document the information they have supplied to the patient, thereby serving as part of the health care team and encouraging further dialogue between provider and patient.

Health sciences librarians also help improve patient/provider communication and patient safety by promoting health literacy. Librarians understand that if patients can't read, understand, and use the health information or discharge instructions they are given, they will not be able to follow their treatment plans correctly. On average, adult Americans read between the eighth- and ninth-grade reading levels (Doak and Doak 2004). Immigrants, those with English as a second language, and older adults also have reduced literacy levels and need simple, clear information to help them to fully engage in their own health care. Librarians are assisting medical practices and hospitals to revise patient instructions and educational materials, using plain language and clear document design. In addition to providing low-literacy health information, librarians supply information in multiple languages when needed.

THE TRIPLE AIM: CARE, HEALTH AND COST

The Institute for Healthcare Improvement refers to the “triple aim” of the U.S. health care system: improving the experience of care, improving the health of the population, and reducing per capita costs (Berwick, Nolan and Whittington 2008). Hospitals need to meet the increasing number of state requirements,

government regulations, quality and patient-safety initiatives, and customer satisfaction standards, while struggling to maintain financial stability.

Today's health sciences librarians support health care institutions by keeping administrators informed of changing industry trends, health care regulations, and the latest medical research and standards of patient care. They stay in touch with current health care industry news and hospital accreditation regulations, scholarly clinical literature, and disseminate important information to hospital officials before it is even requested. Librarians support quality and patient-safety executives by providing articles on effective risk-management procedures such how to prevent patient falls, quality-of-care benchmarks around surgical infections, and studies on how to improve patient flow and patient discharge-care transitions. They respond to requests for information on preventing unnecessary hospital readmissions, failure-mode analysis after a medical error, and avoiding serious “sentinel events” or “never events.”

TECHNOLOGY AND CHANGING EXPECTATIONS

The landscape of health sciences librarianship constantly changes as new technology emerges. The greatest change comes from the evolving expectations of users, whether they are clinicians, administrators, or consumers. In the clinical setting, users demand effective medical-information-delivery systems to bring needed content to anyone who makes medical decisions (Davidoff and Miglus 2011).

The ubiquity of mobile devices has made access to information available throughout the institution and beyond. Just as print books and journals have given way to the quick access available with desktop computers, the desktop computer is now giving way to the immediacy of mobile devices. Mobile devices are useful “to handle simple and some complicated clinical questions” (Davidoff and Miglus 2011: 1907). Managing and acquiring these resources for library users becomes a valuable part of the librarian's role.

Another trend is the emergence and acceptance of the EMR. Librarians are becoming involved with this initiative as “information retrieval” experts—

aiding with classification systems and database searching (Klein-Fedyshin 2010). They are also providing content for decision support at the point of care. Some medical databases provide “infobutton” links to content, or otherwise integrate their content into the medical record.

MAINE: SMALL BUT MIGHTY

Farzad Mostashari, MD, the national health IT coordinator, announced in December 2012 that Maine had topped all states in its percentage of eligible physicians and hospitals paid incentives for “meaningful use” of electronic health records. In a news story on the Government Health IT web site, he described Maine as “the small but mighty” (www.govhealthit.com). This description could apply also to the community of health sciences librarians in Maine. As their institutions navigate new models for delivery of health care, health sciences librarians will continue to support the changing needs of their users. They will continue to provide research and clinical support through expert literature searches and custom packaging of information along with effective, timely support for administrators’ needs for quality and performance information.

As health care moves to a value-based delivery model, health sciences librarians also remain sharply focused on value: What is of most value to users? What technology is needed? What coordination, collaboration or innovation can most help us succeed? By continuing to evolve in answer to these questions, health sciences librarians will remain “small but mighty” in Maine. 🐟

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Deborah Clark is the librarian for Western Maine Health, which includes Stephens Memorial Hospital in Norway. She is past chair of the Maine Health Science Library and Information Consortium. Clark was recently appointed to the Maine Library Commission.

Please turn the page for additional information about the authors.



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