

## Feature Article

# The roles, skills, training needs and contributions of health library and information professionals

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### Abstract

*This study aimed to record the experiences of health information professionals practising across Europe, to provide data to aid career planning, support strategic decision-making for information services, and understand the impact health professionals have. Interviews, surveys, and focus groups were used to gather data to understand the roles of information professionals, and how they support healthcare. Roles have developed, encompassing healthcare challenges, often embracing technologies and pushing the boundaries of traditional library roles. Respondents demonstrated the impact mainly through their evidence based skills. This study enhances our understanding of the complexity of the domain, how it is evolving and impacting on healthcare.*

*Key words:* health librarians; roles; skills; training needs; impact

### Introduction

The changing healthcare context presents many challenges for health information and library professionals in terms of their roles and the ways in which they respond to social, technological, economic and political changes in the work environment. Roles have developed, often embracing technologies and pushing the boundaries of traditional library roles (Brettell and Urquhart, 2012). The sector is information intensive and complex. This complexity requires library and information professionals to have a broad range of skills and attributes to enable them to respond to the demands.

The support for this research was given by EAHIL as one of their 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary year projects. The project aimed to explore the diversity of roles and skills within the health information sector, establish future skills needs, and assess the impact that health library and information professionals are having on healthcare. Having a clear understanding of the changing roles, and the contributions that health library and information professionals make, will help to inform future skills development, and evidence the value and contributions made by the profession.

The health library and information sector is diverse, with opportunities in public, private, voluntary and charitable bodies, and organisations with local, regional, national, and global reach.

As the world continues to strive to find solutions to healthcare problems the need for health information and

sound evidence is increasing. The healthcare community is constantly adapting due to the influences of political, economic, social and technological change. The volume of published evidence to support decision making in the healthcare context is growing exponentially. Health library and information professionals are well equipped to deal with this 'sea' of evidence and can make important contributions to both research and practice in providing support and expertise. Against the backdrop of this changing environment it is important to understand the skills needed to support healthcare professionals in their roles.

The need for increased skills and professional standards to meet these demands has been identified (Robu, and Bakker, 2010), with health library groups calling for librarians to *...create their future within the health sector*" and *"to apply their specialised skillset to add value and benefit right across the health service*, (Health Science Libraries Group, 2010).

This research contributes to the literature and the evidence base by providing an understanding of the current roles, skills, and skills development needs of health library and information professionals across Europe. It captures the diversity of the profession, and gives a better understanding of the nature of the profession and the impact and value that health library and information professionals are having within healthcare.

The main 190 page report has been submitted to the EAHIL board, will be available on the EAHIL website

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and is accessible from the University of Sheffield's institutional repository, the White Rose Repository (Sen, Villa, Chapman, 2014). A summary of the findings is presented in this paper, and will also be presented at the EAHIL conference in Rome, June 2014.

### Methods

Eight interviews were carried out at the EAHIL Workshop in Stockholm. The interviews and focus groups were recorded, transcribed and thematically analysed. A pilot survey was also distributed prior to a full survey being distributed electronically. Forty-seven surveys were completed at the pilot stage, and the results were used to inform the design of the final survey which achieved 513 complete responses. The data gathering took place during 2013.

### Discussion of the results

The survey produced 513 usable responses, predominantly females (429), and 77 males, with 7 not disclosing their gender. Respondents came from 32 countries around the world, with the highest number of responses from the UK (224), France (66) and Canada (47). The majority of respondents were not EAHIL members, and this presents an opportunity for EAHIL to extend its reach.

The participants work across a variety of sectors, primarily in state healthcare and education, with fewer numbers working in the charity and voluntary sector, and in industry. The main user groups are students, doctors, researchers, nurses and allied health professionals. Proportionally, very few respondents provided services directly to patients and the public, with health librarians supplying services via health professionals. Jenkins, Lee, and Smith make the point that health libraries are largely "*invisible*" to members of the public (2011, p. 2), and even the public library health and wellbeing offer has been described as a "*well kept secret*" (Hicks et al., 2010, p. 5).

The majority of the participants in the focus groups, interviews and surveys were in professional (rather than para-professional) roles, and a substantial minority were senior personnel in management roles. The large majority of participants were very well qualified, i.e. with qualifications at postgraduate level. Analysis of the job titles from the final survey showed that the majority of respondents (64%) had the terms 'library' or 'librarian' in their job title, reflecting the continued relevance of traditional 'library' roles in the health information sector. Other key roles were also reflected in job titles including the terms *information, knowledge, management, education, research, collection and*

*resource management, and systematic reviews*. Seventeen respondents had clinical library roles (17 respondents, 3%); and a further 15 respondents (3%) were involved in outreach or community engagement.

Anyangwe (2011) notes the need to look beyond and 'behind' the job title when trying to understand the complexity of the roles carried out by a library professional. Anyangwe (2011) was discussing the academic library role; however, the same can be said in the health sector. Job titles reflect the broad areas of work, but cannot adequately reflect the wide range of competencies and skills held which need to be articulated through advocacy and marketing, and demonstrated in practice. Blumenthal suggests that those roles are dependent on the actions and initiative taken by health librarians themselves, and raises the question, "*what future are health sciences librarians going to build for themselves?*" (2014, p. 4).

The participants are engaged in a wide range of roles, and comments on the diversity of roles and the feeling of being a 'jack-of-all-trades' recurred throughout the data. The roles identified can be categorised into evidence-based roles (e.g. literature searching and teaching/training) and management roles, including library-specific management roles, more generic management roles, communications roles and roles involving technology. Participants also identified a wide variety of skills used in their jobs, including LIS-specific skills as well as technical skills, management skills, 'soft skills' and personal qualities. LIS-specific skills were mentioned most frequently in the final survey, but focus group and interview participants frequently did not think to mention these skills unless prompted, suggesting that they may be taken for granted.

The broad variety of roles performed by participants is striking – both across the sector and within the context of individuals' jobs. Comments on this theme recurred throughout the data. This reflects the diversity of professional roles captured by Brettell and Urquhart (2011) in their overview of the sector.

Participants across all the data collection methods identified a very wide variety of skills, once again reflecting the general feeling of being a 'jack-of-all-trades'. The focus group respondents commented on how their roles were changing – partly because of technology – and the implications that had for the collections and services that they managed, and the skills they needed.

Among the final survey respondents, the skills used most frequently were LIS-specific skills such as

'knowledge of sources' (88% of respondents) and 'information literacy/search skills' (85%) of respondents. In addition to the LIS-specific skills, participants also had skills in other specialist areas, such as technical skills and pedagogical skills; management skills; and 'soft skills' or personal qualities. This broadly corresponds to Corral's (2005, p. 35). three-tier competency framework for LIS professionals, which places LIS skills and technical skills at the core, supplemented by management skills and more generic personal and interpersonal skills.

Participants had acquired their skills mainly in the workplace and at library school. The library school degree was seen as a foundation, with continuing professional development (CPD) and workplace experience providing more specialist skills specific to the health information context. These findings support Petrinic & Urquhart's (2007) observation that continuing professional development in more specialist areas is necessary for health librarians as a supplement to the LIS degree, particularly in a rapidly changing context. Participants showed a strong commitment to CPD and 'keeping up-to-date', and to support this they identified being members of over 160 professional organisations, including EAHIL. A range of training needs were identified, reflecting areas of change within the profession as well as the desire to further hone existing skills such as literature searching. Skills relating to new technologies (e.g. m-libraries, social media, e-learning) were high on the list of development needs.

Participants identified a wide range of challenges, notably shrinking budgets and problems with time and workload. Additional challenges included a lack of appreciation and awareness of the value of library and information services among management and non-library colleagues, and related difficulties in promoting the services. Participants across all phases of the study mentioned challenges relating to keeping up-to-date in a changing environment, compounded by lack of time and a heavy workload. Murphy (2013, p. 251) noted that one way health librarians respond to the changing environment is "to develop new skills and competencies to enable them to take on new roles." Murphy's (2013, p. 252) review of the trends across the globe relating to health librarians and summarising the content of six papers, noted that: "Countries where the funding of health libraries is relatively more secure are better placed to think about how to innovate, improve the status of the profession and extend their skills and competencies." The problems of developing skills, competencies and services in a recession recurred throughout the study.

Participants gave a variety of examples of situations in which they had made critical contributions to healthcare. The majority of these drew on evidence-based LIS skills such as literature searching or information literacy training/teaching. By using these skills, respondents had a direct impact on patient care, health outcomes and clinical decision-making, as well as making more indirect contributions, for example by supporting the education and learning of health professionals and students, and by contributing to the evidence base.

The overwhelming theme from the study with regard to the contributions health library and information professionals make to healthcare was the importance of their LIS professional skills and specifically what we have termed their evidence-based skills. This incorporates searching skills, information literacy skills, teaching and training others to access and search the evidence base, current awareness, and more specialist evidence-based skills, such as critical appraisal and working on systematic reviews. This finding is in contrast to Murphy's (2013, p. 252) review of health libraries where she stated that "evidence-based librarianship failed to score high on most librarians' agenda".

Throughout the study there was evidence of health libraries and librarians shaping their environment with the impact of their work and making contributions to individuals, the service, the organisation, organisational partnerships, regionally, nationally, and internationally. The impact made by the library and information professionals was sometimes seen to be *direct* e.g. having an immediate impact on the care of a patient, or a clinical decision, and in other cases *indirect* e.g. providing evidence that informs service or management changes, or training health professionals who then change the way they practise.

It was notable in the present study that many respondents found it difficult to demonstrate impact and to gather the necessary evidence. Although they often recounted narratives which demonstrated contributions to healthcare, they seemed reluctant to lay claim to these as 'evidence'.

### Conclusions

There are three key points that can be drawn from this data:

1. specialist LIS skills are extremely important in supporting and making a contribution to healthcare particularly the evidence based skills;

2. health information professionals have a direct impact on patient care, health outcomes and clinical decision-making, as well as making a more indirect contribution by supporting the education and learning of health students and professionals, improving and supporting professional practice, and making management and service decisions;
3. demonstrating the value and impact of the profession is difficult, and there is room for a more strategic approach to gathering quantitative and qualitative evidence for the contributions.

The research support received from EAHIL for this 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary project has enabled us to provide an overview of the roles, skills and training needs of health information professionals across Europe and beyond, as well as the challenges facing these professionals and

their critical contributions to healthcare. Roles and skills were diverse and wide-ranging, encompassing both traditional 'library' skills and new areas of expertise. Despite challenges such as budget and workload, health information professionals make both direct and indirect contributions to healthcare, primarily through the exercise of their evidence-based LIS skills.

The study enhances our understanding of the complexity of the domain, enabling organisations such as EAHIL to continue supporting the profession in a targeted way. The findings will be of use to library schools and other training providers in meeting the development needs of (future) health information professionals, and also contribute to the evidence base on the value and impact of information provision in healthcare contexts.

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