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Reassertion of esteem for the hospital library's role during the covid-19 pandemic: a case study

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Abstract:

The Móstoles University Hospital Library in Madrid, Spain, conducts a yearly survey to determine user satisfaction with its support for their caring, teaching, and research endeavours. In 2020 the yearly questionnaire also contained items on the new services introduced by the library to help users deal with the effects of the health crisis faced by the hospital. The results revealed that the library continued to be among staff's most highly esteemed providers of high-quality information. Librarians have been key players in a time of uncertainty, enabling healthcare professionals to find the information needed in a scenario in which decisions could not be adopted lightly.

Keywords: library hospital, new covid-19 services, communication with users, assessment of user satisfaction.

Introduction

The stated mission of the Móstoles University Hospital Health Sciences Library (facility located in the southwest of the Spanish province of Madrid) is to furnish hospital staff with the scientific and technical information they need to conduct their caring, teaching and research activities, and to participate actively in the virtuous circle of scientific publication: providing information management counselling while supporting knowledge creation and contributing to its dissemination.

Library infrastructure consists in physical premises with a study room for pre- and post-graduate students and a virtual library accessible online 24/7. Its human resources include one librarian and one assistant.

In March 2020 when the World Health Organisation declared the covid-19 as a pandemic and the Spanish Government decreed a state of emergency, the hospital decided to close

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off the library's in-person facility whilst its remote-working librarian continued to provide its services online. The assistant was transferred to departments requiring reinforcement to meet other hospital needs in that emergency setting. The physical premises remained closed until March 2021.

During lockdown, from 15 March to 21 June 2020, the disease induced a new working conditions, with the hospital at full capacity and its healthcare professionals (doctors, nurses, trainees...) close to collapse under the workload, caregiving strain and the uncertainty prompted by the unknown. The library services and the librarian assumed the obligation to stand beside their users who were then on the front line of battle and required quality information to offset the sizeable knowledge gaps around-19 and its treatment, diagnosis, adverse effects and so on.

Backed by the experience gleaned from colleagues in other crisis situations (1-3), the librarian engaged actively in selecting, assessing, and disseminating information, tasks crucial to supporting the healthcare and research staff. In addition, the information had to reach the maximum number of professionals (4) and connect with Haugh's (5) three user categories: physical library users, online library users and library non-users, all with heavy work schedules, overwhelmed and anxiously seeking assistance. The goal was to keep the library's standard services operational and provide support for the professionals involved. The communication and dissemination strategy implemented, adapted to the context of the information needs stemming from covid-19, rested on online and mobile resources (6).

A number of lines of work was defined and set up based on mobile communication, bearing in mind that 74.3 % of the Spanish population (2019 data) uses smartphones (7), one of the highest percentages in Europe and worldwide. The outcomes included a WhatsApp group and a covid-contextualised website with a responsive web design to enable mobile access. The sections comprising the website were structured around the products on offer (8):

- a selection of specific resources on covid-19 (SARS-CoV-2) for clinical healthcare staff, including links to sources of information, scientific evidence, official information, journal publishers' resources, clinical trials, platforms to detect fake news...
- theme newsletter (upon user request) with filtered information and links to the full texts of original scientific articles;
- theme alerts;
- synopses of user guides for standard resources.

As support for that endeavour, the librarian participated in #AyudaBiblioteca #COVID19, a platform on which 90 Spanish health sciences librarians share information (9). The information pooling and teamworking involved rendered the initiative particularly helpful under such exceptional circumstances. The basic idea was to optimise joint efforts to locate credible and reliable information of interest (10).

In that situation, new and exceptional for all concerned (librarians and users), it was more important than ever to ascertain whether the library continued to be perceived as a service

essential to dealing with the challenges posed by health crises. Insight was also needed into user esteem for the services instituted in the wake of the disease. This article discusses a case study of the impact of the pandemic on user satisfaction with a hospital library's services.

Review of the literature

Incidence of covid-19 has been high in Spain, particularly in certain regions such as Madrid, with severe implications for its hospital system (11). That has logically carried serious implications for health sciences libraries, whose librarians have had to adapt their role to assume new responsibilities in record time and address challenges other than those facing their colleagues specialising in other areas. They have had to develop new strategies to adjust to medical staffs' new reading and research habits (12) while coping as well with the constraints imposed by home-officing. The rising demand for literature on covid-19 under those circumstances fathered new ways to render services, prioritising online vehicles.

Organisations around the world such as WHO continue to compile updated information on all aspects of the pandemic. World-scale cooperation has never been more intense. Universities have also contributed resources and services to the endeavour. Medical institutions have likewise responded to the demand for new covid-19-related resources, creating and periodically updating websites with lists of key resources (13). Hospital library websites in any country exemplify the all-out effort deployed seek and organise resources on covid-19 and ensure their universal accessibility.

Despite the short time that has elapsed, librarians in a number of countries have already shared their experience. All report a high demand for online services as a means for providing significant, high-quality information at very short notice (14). Various forms of nimble and fluent communication have also proved most useful for disseminating all that information (15). A flexible and speedy response has proved to be a key to success in today's circumstances (16). These professionals' experiences show that they passed the coronavirus stress test with flying colours in a very challenging atmosphere and learned to plan more effectively in the face of the unknown (17). Collecting and synthesising evidence to afford healthcare professionals with support and guidance in their decision-making around the unknown has become more important than ever (18).

Material and method

This study aimed to ascertain the impact of covid-19 on user satisfaction with hospital library services, resource, and staff. The method consisted in comparing the results of the most recent yearly survey, coincident with the pandemic (March 2020-March 2021), to those for the previous four.

All library services have been EN-ISO 9001:2015-certified yearly since 2007. One of the requisites for maintaining certification, which substantiates library quality, is to conduct a yearly survey to assess user satisfaction. In the 2021 (March 2020-March 2021) edition,

in light of the situation generated by the pandemic, items were added to the standard questionnaire to collect information on the library's new offering.

The 12 items (10 closed and two open questions) on the annual survey request user input on the collection, services, staff and the library as a whole. In the closed questions users report their satisfaction with the services on a five-point Likert scale: highly satisfied; satisfied; neutral; unsatisfied; and highly unsatisfied. An additional 10 items (nine open and one closed) were included to determine satisfaction with the library services and content created from March 2020 to March 2021, for a total of 22. The design of the second part of the questionnaire drew from other surveys described in the literature. Satisfaction was assessed for most of the additional items likewise on the grounds of a five-point Likert scale (5- Very high; 4-High; 3-Medium; 2-Low and 1-Very low). In the first of these new questions, item 13 on the questionnaire, respondents were asked to specify their role in the hospital, from a list of occupations compiled with the library's database of registered users: working or emeritus professional (doctor, biochemist, genetist, pharmacist, psychologist), medical intern (MIR), psychological intern (PIR), pharmaceutical intern (FIR), working or emeritus nurse, nurse intern (EIR), other healthcare staff (such as assistants or technicians). For questions 14 and 20 on time savings the possible replies were: None; < 1 hour; 1 to 2 hours; 2 to 3 hours; > 3 hours. Under question 21 on information providers, eight types of health science information providers, including the library itself, were listed as options.

The survey (reproduced in Annex) was conducted online with the LimeSurvey tool. It was emailed as a circular on 20 May to all online library registrees (n=775) and closed on 31 May, 11 days later. It was also publicised in the library's WhatsApp group.

Results

The 23.35 % response rate (n= 775) was deemed high, bearing in mind that the volume of registered users to whom the questionnaire was mailed included the hospital's entire staff. Moreover, the number of registered users is not the same as the number of actual library users and the intensity of activities directly related to healthcare during the pandemic may have affected the response rate. In the 5 years analysed, the highest rate, recorded in 2017, was 29 %, and the lowest, in 2019, 11.9 %. Most of the respondents were specialists (68.3 %), followed by nursing staff (19 %) (Figure 1).

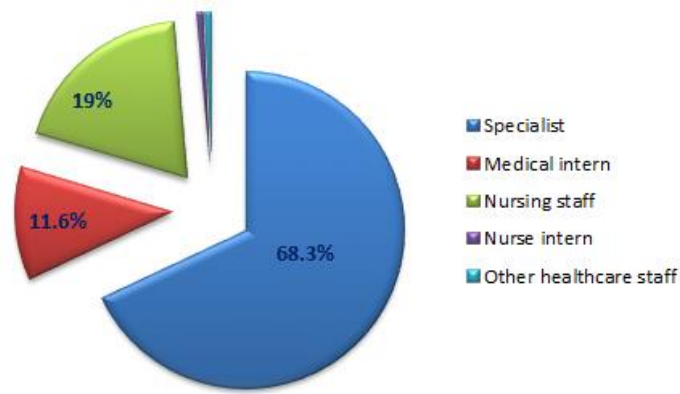


Figure 1. Survey respondents by profession

The results for the two parts of the survey, standard and covid-19 items, are discussed below.

Annual (standard) satisfaction survey, patterns

The results for the 10 closed items on the annual satisfaction questionnaire for the last 5 years (2017-2021) are bar-graphed in Figures 2 and 3.

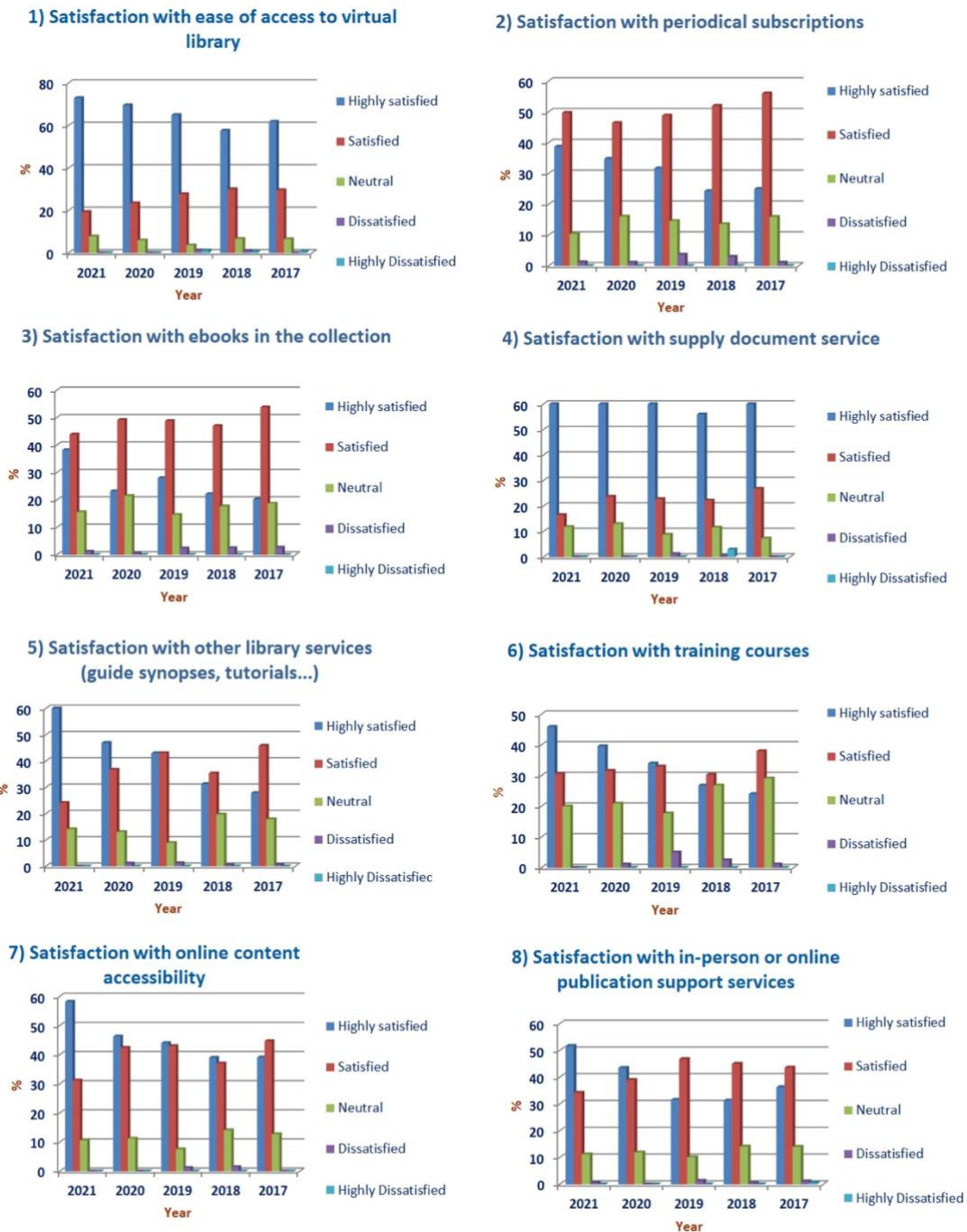


Figure 2. Results of annual library user satisfaction survey, 2017-2021 (items 1 through 8)

Further to the replies to the first item on ease of access to the 24-h online library, 73 % claimed to be highly satisfied and none dissatisfied, year after year (Figure 2, graph 1).

Satisfaction with the collection was observed to rise steadily with time (Figure 2, graphs 2 and 3) across the 5 years. The 25 % of respondents highly satisfied with the periodicals available in 2017 grew to 38.7 % in 2021, when 49.71 % was satisfied. Satisfaction with

the books in the collection rose even more steeply, from 20.3 % in 2017 to 38.2 % in 2021, whilst the percentage of dissatisfied users declined.

The results for the five items on satisfaction with library services showed that the one most highly esteemed was the document exchange service (Figure 2, graph 4), through which articles not included in the library’s own collection can be requested and obtained from other Spanish libraries. A total of 71.2 % of users reported high satisfaction with the service. The degree of satisfaction with the other services rose across the 5-year period, particularly in 2021, for:

- the 27.9 % of highly satisfied users of guide synopses and tutorials (other services) in 2017 grew to 60.6 % in 2021 (Figure 2, graph 5);
- for courses and workshops, the 24 % highly satisfied in 2017 grew to 45.9 % in 2021 (Figure 2, graph 6);
- in 2017 the 39.1 % highly satisfied with the online content on offer grew to 58.2 % in 2021 (Figure 2, graph 7);
- the 36.3 % of respondents claiming to be highly satisfied with both in-person and online support for publishing scientific papers grew to 51.7 % in 2021 (Figure 2, graph 8).

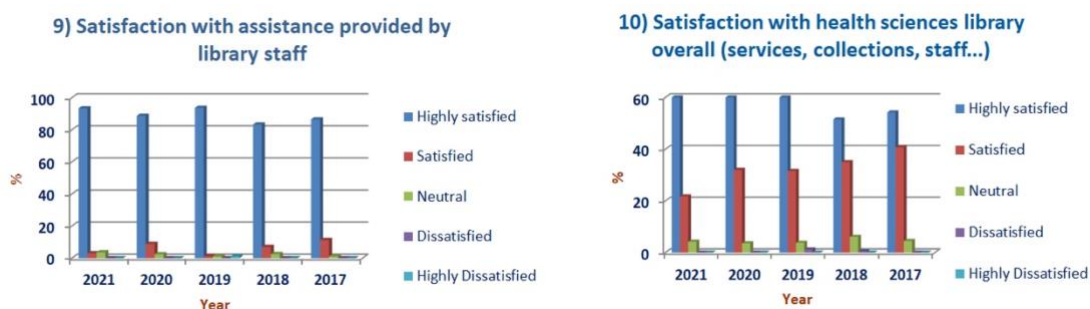


Figure 3. Results of annual library user satisfaction survey, 2017-2021 (items 9 and 10)

The degree of satisfaction with the assistance provided by staff (Figure 3, graph 9) was high in all 5 years. The 86.5 % of highly satisfied users in 2017 grew to 93.4 % in 2021, with not a single user claiming to be dissatisfied.

User appraisal of the library as a whole (Figure 3, graph 10) followed the same upward pattern: from 54.2 % of highly satisfied users in 2017 to 74.1 % in 2021. The replies to the open questions contained not a single complaint or representative request. Compliments prevailed in the comments.

The results of this first part of the survey showed that the services where satisfaction rose most steeply over the years were: quick guides and tutorials, with a 32.7 % increase; and the courses and workshops organised by the library, where 21.9 % were more satisfied at the end than at the beginning of the period. At 19.1 %, the service with the third steepest rise in very satisfied users was the website and the fourth, at 15.4 %, support for publishing scientific papers. The percentage of formerly ‘satisfied’ users claiming to being ‘highly satisfied’ also rose in those four services.

Questions on satisfaction with services rendered during the pandemic

User opinion and perception of the intangible and indirect benefits of the services rendered by the library during the first stage of the pandemic was sought with items 14 to 21, whilst the first of the new items, 13, requested information on respondents' hospital role, and the last, 22, was an open space for comments and suggestions.

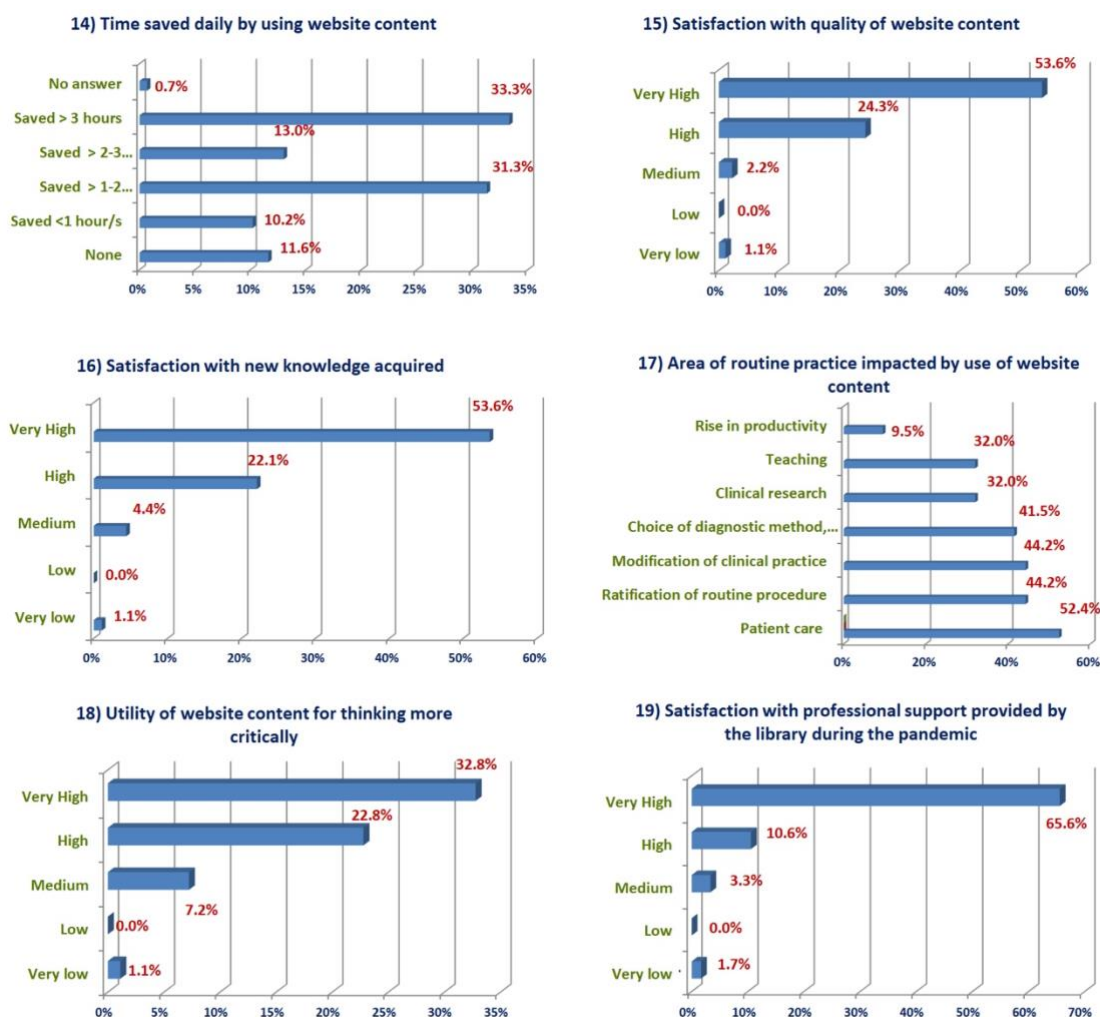


Figure 4. Results of survey on user esteem and perceived benefits during the pandemic (items 14 to 19)

According to the data plotted in Graph 14 (Figure 4), the content and structures of the library's covid-19 website saved 77.4 % of users more than 1 h, 33.3 % over 3 h and 31.3 % from 1 h to 2 h. Only 11.6 % saved no time. Satisfaction with the quality of the content formulated by the library was rated as 4+ by 77.9 % of the respondents (Graph 15, Figure 4) and awarded the highest score by 53.6 %. Graph 16 shows that 80.1 % of respondents reported high and 53.6 % 'very high' satisfaction with the new knowledge acquired from website content.

In reply to the question on the impact of applying covid-19 website content on different areas of professional practice (Graph 17, Figure 4), 52.4 % reported an impact on the

quality of patient care, 44.2 % on both ratification and modification of routine professional procedure and 32 % on research and teaching. In addition, further to the data in Graph 18 (Figure 4), 62.8 % of respondents claimed that the content helped them think more critically (scores of 3+), 32.8 % to their ‘very high’ satisfaction.

In all, 79.5 % of library users (Graph 19, Figure 4) reported at least medium satisfaction with the support from the library during the pandemic (scores of 3+), whilst for 65.6 % the degree of satisfaction was ‘very high’.

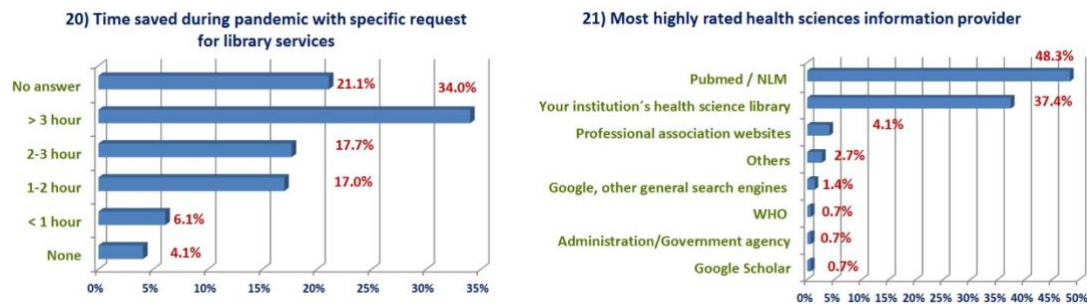


Figure 5. Results of survey on user esteem and perceived benefits during the pandemic (items 20 and 21)

Keeping routine library services operational during the first stage of the pandemic saved time daily for 68.7 % of respondents, with savings of over 3 h for 34 %. Only 4.08 % claimed no time savings whatsoever (Graph 20, Figure 5).

In the question on information providers, 37.4 % of respondents identified the library as the primary source, a percentage second only to the 48.3 % who scored the PubMed / National Library of Medicine as the provider of choice and much higher than the 4.1 % who awarded that status to professional association websites (Graph 21, Figure 5).

The only replies to item 22 requesting comments, suggestions or complaints were complimentary.

These findings could not be compared to those of other hospital libraries, for no similar study was found in the literature. This article aspires to pave the way to establishing differences and similarities on the satisfaction with services provided during the covid-19 pandemic.

CONCLUSIONS

The high user response rate to the survey described, despite their pandemic-induced heavy workload, caregiving fatigue and need to attend to their teaching and research

obligations, denote their complicity with the library. Such complicity was higher among specialists and interns than among nursing staff.

Although the library's physical premises were closed to enforce social distancing, users reported high levels of satisfaction with its online presence during the crisis and appreciation for the new services with which it intensified its support. Much as in other libraries, the pandemic afforded the opportunity to institute new non-traditional services without forfeiting contact with users (22). The results of the surveys suggest that the crisis entailed no challenge to but actually strengthened the perception of the hospital library's utility.

The library's following as content generator also grew. The content created on covid-19 translated into substantial time savings for users, who claimed high degrees of satisfaction with its quality, with the new knowledge acquired and with the guidance for more critical thinking and better decision-making (23). Confirmation of those findings came with user perception of the library as information provider, which was named as the main source by the second highest percentage of respondents, after PubMed / NLM. Application of website content had a substantial impact on users' professional endeavour, particularly in terms of patient care, the ratification/modification of routine practice and choice of diagnostic procedures, treatment and similar. Although to a lesser extent, it also impacted teaching and research activities. The conclusion drawn is that this line of work merits future consolidation and reinforcement with the creation of more content geared to helping users with different backgrounds develop skills and meet their information needs.

A growing need for cooperation has also been identified in this stage of the pandemic, which afforded yet another opportunity to persevere in inter-library partnering and initiate cooperation in new dimensions (24). Although expansion of the collection depends not directly on the library but primarily on the purchasing policy pursued by Madrid's Regional Department of Health, satisfaction in that respect clearly rose in terms of both periodicals and books, with volumes doubling over the last year. High levels of satisfaction for the institution of new resources such as periodicals in interactive and video format were also recorded.

The services rendered by hospital librarians during the pandemic in pursuit of the most reliable scientific evidence substantiate the value of their involvement and importance of their partnering with professionals and doctors, researchers and other clinical staff. Their endeavour in the early stages of the pandemic has indisputably reinforced the library's relationship with its users, thanks to librarians' hands-on understanding of staff needs and application of online resources to work with them on an everyday basis. Such symbiosis should be sustained over time, driving joint development in the face of an unprecedented present and future.

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Annex - Items on questionnaire

A) Standard items (all five years)

Possible replies to items 1 through 10: highly satisfied; satisfied; neutral; unsatisfied; and highly unsatisfied.

1. ACCESS. Indicate your satisfaction with online (24/7) access to our virtual library and all its resources (collection) and services.
2. COLLECTION. Indicate your satisfaction with the collection of scientific journals to which you have immediate access through the library's subscription.
3. COLLECTION. Indicate your satisfaction with the collection of ebooks to whose full text you have access through the library's subscription.
4. SERVICES. Indicate your satisfaction with the document exchange service (through which articles unavailable in our collection may be requested from other Spanish libraries).
5. SERVICES. Indicate your satisfaction with the following materials: tutorials, user guides, library documentary tools available to users.
6. SERVICES. Indicate your satisfaction with the lectures, workshops and courses organised by the library.
7. SERVICES. Indicate your satisfaction with the information and content listed in the menu in the left-hand column of the home page to access website content (database, portals, repositories, books, guides, services...).
8. SERVICES. Indicate your satisfaction with the information and content developed by the library and furnished on the hospital's intranet/website (source of information of scientific evidence, support for scientific publishing, 10 considerations before publishing, scientific output...).
9. STAFF. Indicate your satisfaction with the support provided by library staff.
10. Indicate your overall satisfaction with the resources managed by the library, either in the form of immediate access to the periodicals to which it subscribes or through the document exchange service for material not directly available.
11. Specify which resources you deem imperative to your own or your department's professional practice and not found in the library. Before answering, please consider the need critically (personal/collective/cost/potential use/access through library services).

12. Specify the resources or type of documentary counsel not provided by the library that you deem imperative to your own or your department's professional endeavour.

B) Items on library performance during the covid-19 pandemic (last year only)

13. Specify your professional role in the hospital:

- Specialist
- Medical intern
- Nursing staff
- Nurse intern
- Other healthcare staff

14. Indicate the time you save in your daily routine by using the covid-19 content on the library's website:

- None
- < 1 hour
- 1-2 hours
- 2-3 hours
- > 3 hours

15. Indicate your satisfaction with the quality of that content:

5-Very high; 4-High; 3-Medium; 2-Low; 1-Very low

16. Indicate your satisfaction with the new knowledge acquired:

5-Very high; 4-High; 3-Medium; 2-Low; 1-Very low

17. If you deem website content to have impacted your routine practice during the pandemic, indicate the area most intensely affected:

- Patient care
- Ratification of routine procedure
- Modification of clinical practice
- Choice of diagnostic method, procedures, medication and similar
- Clinical research
- Teaching
- Productivity

18. Indicate your satisfaction with website content in terms of guidance for more critical thinking (i.e., unbiased exploration of different situations)

5-Very high; 4-High; 3-Medium; 2-Low; 1-Very low

19. Indicate your satisfaction with the professional support provided by the library during the pandemic:

5-Very high; 4-High; 3-Medium; 2-Low; 1-Very low

20. The library's services have been operational throughout the pandemic. Indicate the time saved you by the librarian's support in the use of library services (request for bibliographic searches, clinical trials, where to publish and similar):

- None
- < 1 hour
- 1-2 hours
- 2-3 hours
- > 3 hours

21. Indicate which of the following is your primary health sciences information provider, professionally speaking:

- Google scholar
- Administration / Government agencies
- WHO (World Health Organization)
- Google, other general search engines
- Professional association websites
- Your hospital's health science library
- PubMed/NLM
- Other

22. Use this space for any comments, suggestions or complaints you may have in connection with library services.