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## **LET'S READ TOGETHER: GETTING CLOSE WITH PAEDIATRIC PATIENTS AT HOSPITAL UNIVERSITI SAINS MALAYSIA**

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**Abstract**

Cultivating reading habits among children from the early stage is a big challenge in information age. Reading habits is a starting point to be a literate person; who is able to read and have formal or informal education. Indeed, children's with healthcare condition needs special support from all parties include parents, caregivers, teachers and hospital administrators to nurture reading habits among them. Bibliotherapy technique has been applied to help pediatric patients in solving problems and coping with life changes by using books or reading materials especially related to their health. This technique will help them to undergo recovery process and treatment from caregivers. Book Buddies project conducted by Hamdan Tahir Library implements this technique on paediatric patients at Hospital USM. The impacts of the project measure via observation, discussion and involvement of pediatric patients in activities scheduled. A mobile library service was introduced as an extended of library services to pediatric patients and guardian. The service will help the needy people to increase knowledge and spend their leisure time with a benefit activity. The number of book loan transactions increased from time to time which is achieved the project's objectives. May this project will create a good dimension and increase reputation of library and university's role in the eyes of Malaysian society.

**Keywords:** Bibliotherapy, Community Service, Library, Paediatric Patients

## **Introduction**

Traditionally, the library was merely a place that housed a collection of books and available to the community for reading, learning, borrowing and etc. The library played an important role in community and has a diverse impact to them. With the advent of the digital age, numerous people have given thought to what the future of the library will bring. Despite being primarily focused on attracting people into the library, many libraries also try to reach out to the wider community particularly to those who are unable to come to the library. This service will help to involve the community and also ensure that everyone is catered for and can enjoy reading and learning. Therefore the Hamdan Tahir Library has taken the initiative to reach the community nearby by participating in one of the programs lead by the Hospital Universiti Sains Malaysia. The program is specifically for paediatric patients (children) who are undergoing treatment at the Hospital Universiti Sains Malaysia. As the library goal is to promote the benefits of reading and learning, bibliotherapy methods have been applied to cultivate a reading habit amongst them from an early age. The Hamdan Tahir Library has diverse resources accessible for community including librarians' skills. The librarians will implement their skills combined with the bibliotherapy techniques in approaching paediatric patients. This treatment method is not commonly practiced in Malaysia; however it has been practiced abroad by many such as counsellors, psychologists and nurses. As mentioned by Gubert (1993), Sadie Peterson Delaney was the first librarian who was able to use bibliotherapy in helping recovering mentally ill patients at the Veterans Administration Hospital in Tuskegee, Alabama. The involvement of librarians and library staff described in this paper demonstrates the importance of library in term of its roles and community's perception of librarianships profession.

## **Background of the study**

"Riang Ria Rabu" (3 R or Wonderful Wednesday) is a program initiated by the Department of Paediatrics, School of Medical Sciences, USM Health Campus. This program was conducted weekly by medical students who have their paediatric posting at the department under supervision of their lecturers. As the program benefits the children most, the department has encouraged other volunteers from other departments to facilitate and join together. The library management has taken the initiative to participate in the project as recommended by the University to reach the bottom billion in community. This project began in 2010 and two teams of volunteers were set up to carry out activities in the Children's Resource Centre, USM hospital according to a schedule given by the Department of Pediatric. Many activities have been implemented in this program such as storytelling as the major one followed by coloring, drawing, solving jigsaw puzzle, origami, singing, games and many more. The storytelling session, for example, does not only offer an interactive learning experience for children but also encourages social interaction between the children and the guardians who are accompanying them. As the program proved positive impact, the library management decided to apply for a grant from the Division of Industry and Community Network, USM. This grant will help to ensure the success and continuity of the program. The grant was used to finance the acquisition of books, toys, gifts

and stationery. Furthermore, the library managed to secure collaboration and contribution from Mattel Shared Service Solutions Pt. Limited., Institut Terjemahan dan Buku Malaysia (ITBM), and Koperasi USM Berhad. The contribution is varied such as books and toys and was located at Children Resource Centre for children to use at any time.

This project focused on paediatric patients from various ethnicities, religions, levels of education, and family backgrounds. It was found that many of them need to stay in hospital for a longer period because of continuous treatment and distance from their residential areas. Because of that, the opportunity has widen for the library to optimize their valuable time with something related to children learning growth such as reading books, watching educational videos clips and many more. Besides, the guardians can help in the selection of reading materials to suit their children's interests and reading levels. This project cultivates the reading habit without limitations and assisted both paediatric patients and their guardians. It was recorded in 2013, a total of 78 paediatric patients from ages 1 to 12 years and their guardians have participated in this project. In addition, positive feedback for this project has been received from the guardians, doctors, nurses and hospital management.

### **Bibliotherapy Process**

Pardeck (1994 cited in Strub 2011) has categorized the bibliotherapy process or implementation into four main steps. These are identifying the problems, the selection of reading materials, reading the selected materials and follow-up activity after the reading activity. The aspect of the implementation process involves identifying the problem to facilitate the therapeutic process. The problem can be identified through interviews and conversations. Once the problem is identified, the reading material should be selected so that it is consistent and coincides with the patients' scenario. In this situation, librarians play a major role since it is their field of expertise. The third process involves reading the selected material. According to Foss (2009), a child is not required to read the material, but should they choose to participate, they naturally choose two or three selected reading materials or are read to by the volunteers. The final stage is the assessment after reading to identify the effectiveness whether the reading has had a positive impact on the patient.

### **Methods of bibliotherapy**

There are various methods that can be used in the implementation of bibliotherapy. The most conventional way is the use of novels, short stories, fairy tales, sagas and illustrated books. Such literature may be of interest and have positive impacts on children. Some examples of the titles that are often used are *Chicken soup for the soul*, *A friend like Simon: A story about Autism*, *Little tree: A story for children with serious medical problems*, *Gentle Willow: A story for children about dying*, *Sleep Diamond*, and *A tale of 1001 nights*.

In addition, the read-aloud storytelling technique plays an important role by allowing the volunteers involved to be creative in their delivery of a story, thus creating a positive impact and can attract the listeners. Alongside creative read-aloud storytelling, the use of video and compact discs showing various stories can also be used. This method is more convenient, can attract and hold patients' interest and includes stories, illustrations and sound effects for stories such as *Patch Adams*, *Upin & Ipin*, *Once upon a time a long time ago...* and *Wonderpet*. To provide more engaging scenarios, other interactive activities can be used such as games, colouring, painting, quizzes and origami. These activities have been used to attract and engage readers and and make the reading experience bolder and more.

### **Advantages and disadvantages**

Bibliotherapy method has many advantages as well as disadvantages and weaknesses, depending on various factors and situations. Among the advantages that can be gained through bibliotherapy is the increased understanding and ability to reduce stress in line with the needs of patients and the therapeutic treatment that children encounter while in the hospital wards. The environment and conditions in the ward are something that is intimidating for children and fear is a major factor as they deal with strangers and various tools outside their previous experience. In diverse and challenging situations, reading is the best therapy that can help to eliminate fear as well as boredom. For children who are interested in reading, this therapy can provide relief to them. Bibliotherapy can also increase a child's development systematically and quickly, to help them acquire and improve knowledge, as well as to increase the motivation on any subject.

However, there are disadvantages of this method that we have to face. For example, this therapy cannot be applied to all patients because the method is limited to those who love to read, have a passion for understanding and a desire to read. Moreover, the effectiveness of this therapy requires a sustained period of time and commitment from the patients. The other weaknesses are reading can also be an outlet for tension which may cause anger, hot-tempered behavior, and impatience through inactivity.

### **Results and Findings**

The objectives of this project were to improve the motivation and psychology of child patients and their guardians to face with the illness. This method hopefully will encourage them to think positively. Besides, this project is also able to cultivate a reading habit among patients and guardians. At the same time to raise awareness about the importance of reading and the role of library to the community. It also encourages volunteerism spirit among library staff. Bibliotherapy methods can be applied through many approaches, but Hamdan Tahir Library only will concentrate on three main approaches. These three approaches were implemented by two groups of volunteers and involved all patients and their guardians in Pediatrics Ward.

Discussions and interviews were the first approach implemented. This kind of approach directly involved discussions between volunteers and patients or guardians. From the interviews with them, it can deliver the information about patients' background and their illness. As a result, suitable and exact reading materials were selected based on patients' scenarios. Storytelling technique was a way to build communication with patients and their guardians. Volunteers associated a character in a story to stimulate the spirit of the patients and their guardians. So that they have positive thinking and perspective towards the illness and able to overcome the stress when facing their situations. In addition, in order to stimulate children creativity, volunteers also encouraged them to participate together through various games, puzzles, colouring activities, quizzes and origami.

Second, observation. Through observation, volunteers acted as observers of the participation of patients' activities. Based on information through observation, volunteers will hold a discussion within the team to improve the coming sessions. Last, the implementation of regular activities. Two teams were established within library staff from all levels. This activity was known as "Riang Ria Rabu", conducted every Wednesday afternoon for two and half hours and according to the schedule. To date, the project has demonstrated positive impacts on patients and their guardians. At the early stage, patients and their guardians were difficult and not interested to join the activities because involvement of library in the curing process is still new in Malaysia. Volunteers needed to take the initiatives to build a relationship in order to ensure the project run smoothly and effectively.

To conclude, the project achieved the objectives and built positive relationship between PHT and patients and their guardians. As a result of the project, PHT also introduced Mobile Library Services to the Pediatrics Ward. This unique project involved all library staff and the service was conducted every Sunday for two and half hours. The project also involved the use of Open Source System, OpenBiblio for borrowing and returning the materials.

## **Impacts and Discussion**

It can be observed that the project has generated positive outcomes to those directly involved individuals – the paediatric patients, guardians and the volunteers per se. Encouraging responses from the patients inspire volunteers to continuously elevate the level of implementation for the project. The impact of the project on the children can be gradually noticed as they become more enthusiastic to participate in the activities carried out during the so-called "Riang Ria Rabu" programme.

Impacts of the project that can be conclusively identified:

### **a. Fostering reading interest among youngsters.**

The most notable impact of this activity was the promotion of reading habit among both the young patients and the adults. This was especially true for those patients and guardians from rural areas that had less exposure to interesting books and lacked library

facilities in the area where they live. The habit of reading was established from the outset of the project. Volunteers who managed the mobile library become aware of increasing number of books being borrowed by young patients at these wards.

**b. Reducing emotional stress**

The struggle to overcome illness may be strenuous to some especially to young patients. Staying in wards may also inflict emotional stress as they spend their time away from their home. Thus reading is a convenient way of reducing stress that makes a difference to their life at the hospital. Stories and characters during storytelling can influence attitudes and help patients to reduce the strain of ongoing illness. The activities also affected patients and had a very positive impact by developing imagination and providing educational opportunities. This project was meant to help patients and their guardians by reducing stress, the burden of pain, anxiety, while also providing entertainment and cheering them up even for a moment. As commented by a parent to a child warded at the hospital: *this event is always eagerly awaited by her son after a hard day undergoing leukemia treatment in the ward where the environment is less than pleasant. While still not able to read fluently, illustrations in the books enabled him to understand the contents and helped to treat the pain suffered.*

**c. Augmenting patient's cognitive development**

Activities like let's talk, showing children's movies, mind challenging games, colouring activities, origami and crafts not only develop physical skills that help to stimulate the patient, but they also have an emotional effect, improve mental development, develop creative thinking and help to improve patients' positive outlook. Games allow patients to gain control of their situation and develop feelings and coping skills that can assist them to deal with their real life situation. Puteri Alia (12 years) always actively participated in the project during the "Riang Ria Rabu" whilst undergoing cancer treatment in the ward, until she breathed her last breath in the hospital in August 2013.

**d. Boosting patient morale**

An indirect outcome of the project was the provision of strong and cohesive moral support for the patients. Moral support is very important in social life among humans. This is because the support and caring attitude shown towards patients helps them to reclaim their spirit and inner strength. Patients came from diverse backgrounds and some did not have strong family ties, were born into a poor family and suffered from domestic abuse. The Project demonstrated to many patients the fact that many people were concerned about them, willing to help them restore their health and indirectly loved them, especially those patients who had lost family members.

**e. Cultivating collaborative and interactive patient care**

Discussions with parents and nurses revealed that the children were fuss-free after attending "Riang Ria Rabu". This condition in turn improves the treatment at the wards as the young patients were less attached to the nurses. Patients felt they were

appreciated, not alone, there were people who loved them and believed in them and kept their focus away from thinking about the disease. Similar results were reported during follow-up treatment where patients adhered to scheduled follow-up treatment. Reading (read aloud) had a powerful potential therapeutic value (Lenn, 2004, p.1) for the children waiting for the scheduled Wednesday activities.

A dominant impact of the Project was perceived in the number of effective interactions, between volunteers with patients, and between patients and guardians. According to Thompson and Stanford (1981) reading-aloud reduces unfamiliarity by creating an atmosphere of fun (playful environment). As an English proverb says laughter is the best medicine. Storytelling sessions also led to the building of the confidence amongst the activity volunteers.

**f. Expanding cooperation**

Cooperation between the library and the hospital has been running smoothly and there are already several other partner libraries which have shown interest in supporting the Project as a volunteer. Contributions to this project are not limited to reading materials, and it also accepts donations of furniture and toys from benefactors.

## **Conclusion**

The designed programme has accomplished the objectives to reach the bottom billion in the community by serving reading materials and cultivating reading habits to all levels of community regardless of their health conditions. Reading habits among kids, teenagers and adults can be enhanced by involving them in attractive activities and giving chance for them to borrow free books. Mobile library service as an outcome of this project will be introduced in these pediatric wards. This new service will help them to get reading materials more easily and encourage them to spend valuable times with their beloved children. At the same time, the Malaysia vision to establish a caring society will come true as targeted by former Malaysian Prime Minister in vision 2020.

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