The Role of Canadian Public Librarians in Promoting Health Literacy: Potential Programs and Partnerships

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Abstract

This paper seeks to explore health literacies with a focus on public libraries and their patrons. The authors’ aim is to extract major themes, challenges, and recommendations for further research and collaboration between health professionals and information professionals in promoting health literacy skills to the public. Major issues will be discussed on the subjects of public service, education, and collaboration between health specialists and information specialists. A major focus of the paper is Canadian health literacy issues, as well as Canadian health information dissemination.

Time constraints and budget cuts in the health care system have caused a major strain on health professionals. Within the system, there is a shortage of doctors, nurses, and time devoted to health literacy. As a result, patients often seek answers to their health concerns on their own and supplement their understanding of individual health issues by searching for information via the Internet. While consumers often seek answers to their health questions online, the lack of quality control on the Internet is problematic. Public librarians should therefore turn their attention to promoting and providing reliable online information. Meeting the needs of any group can be a challenge for information professionals in public libraries, especially when it comes to health literacy. Public libraries tend to be one of the first places of contact for general public inquiries on infectious diseases and emerging illnesses. Public librarians play an important role in their communities in all aspects of information research and therefore should be advocates for promoting proper health information.

Keywords

health professionals; Canadian health literacy; public libraries; public librarians; Canadian health information
Introduction

Time constraints and budget cuts in the health care system have caused a major strain on health professionals (Gillaspy). Within the system, there is a shortage of doctors, nurses and time devoted to health literacy (Harris et al.). As a result, patients often seek answers to their health concerns on their own and supplement their understanding of individual health issues by searching for information via the Internet. However, turning to the Internet for health information presents its own set of issues. While the Internet provides a convenient and timely way for patients to find information, the amount of health information they encounter can be overwhelming (Murray). Public libraries should therefore consider promoting authoritative consumer health information and its associated health literacies.

Promoting the skills of health literacy requires some understanding of its context. Health literacy is defined as “the ability to understand health information, including the use of reading, writing, listening, speaking, arithmetic, and conceptual knowledge” (Parker et al. S81). Ultimately, the health literacy skills of library patrons should be fostered and advanced by library services. Public librarians should be made aware of the different health information resources available for library users such as teens, seniors, and new Canadians. Understanding the needs of all library users will help to improve services and promote health literacy efforts.

While this paper focuses primarily on Canadian issues and Canadian public libraries and librarians, a considerable amount of the available health literacy literature tends to be from an American perspective. The authors will draw on these resources and perspectives with the goal of finding best practices regarding Canadian public librarians and health literacy promotion. The importance and impact of online information will be discussed to introduce the major challenges faced by public librarians.

The Internet and online health information

The Internet has transformed how consumer health information is disseminated and how it is accessed by the public. The Pew Internet & American Life Project’s 2007 survey “How people use the Internet, libraries, and government agencies when they need help" revealed how people find information when faced with complex health-related problems. The Pew study found 45% of those surveyed dealt with serious health problems, and 58% of those turned to the Internet for information, while 13% went to their public library (Murray). The study showed that 73 million Americans use the Internet to find health information, but researchers did not take into account demographics or the routine evaluation of sources by users (Picerno).

The intersection between the Internet and public libraries is an important area to consider, especially since many libraries offer free computer access. A 2006 study found that most public libraries in the United States provide access to the Internet and that 61% of patrons use library computers regularly during their visits. Additionally, 72%
of public libraries surveyed were the only source of free Internet access in their communities (Smith). Unfortunately, there is no specific Canadian literature reflecting these findings. However, due to the lack of Canadian information, American studies help us gain an understanding of North American public library usage patterns.

Many patrons want to be self-sufficient in their search for health information and may turn directly to the Internet instead of a librarian. Tracy Daley states that while consumers often seek answers to their health questions online, the lack of quality control on the Internet is problematic. Public librarians should therefore turn their attention to promoting and providing reliable online information. Public librarians may also need to teach patrons to ask critical questions about online health information sources. MedlinePlus, for example, was introduced to American and Canadian public libraries in the mid-1990s; it helps to disseminate authoritative medical information to the public in Canada and the US, not to mention other countries. It is well-received even though it lacks Canadian content.

Public librarians have assumed teaching roles within their organizations, much like their academic library counterparts. A number of public libraries provide training workshops which have received positive feedback (Wood et al.). One of the real challenges in promoting health literacy in public libraries is managing the increased expectations of patrons once a program is underway. However, part of the issue with promoting health literacy in public libraries also includes properly managing expectations of librarians. While some library users bypass reference librarians in their search for health information (Wood et al.), others may expect them to ‘know all the answers’ (Picerno 15). A public librarian must provide varied and reliable information while striking a precarious balance between providing information but not medical advice (Picerno). Some people may not even use library services, preferring to search for health information from home via the Internet (Wood et al.). However, offering well-designed regular classes in consumer health information can dispel user discomfort and build important relationships of trust with librarians about personal health topics.

**Library Services and the Public**

Canada is a diverse country with a range of cultures, ethnicities, languages and populations. Meeting the needs of any group can be a challenge for information professionals in public libraries, especially when it comes to health literacy. Librarians face the complex task of connecting diverse populations in their communities to programs and sources of health information. Lacking the knowledge of available medical resources and an understanding of their professional roles in providing patrons with health information are additional challenges for public librarians (Harris et al.).

With so few medical practitioners per capita in Canada, more individuals are assuming a proactive role in their own health and trying to stay informed about health care (Harris et al.). The Internet and online resources are important for self-advocacy even though many consumers lack the skills to find and evaluate information resources. Despite the work of the Public Health Agency of Canada and Health Canada, there is a general lack
of health information awareness in many communities (Murray). Some studies show that, in the US, free comprehensible information and promotional activities are disseminated to the public with reasonable ease so that the public is aware of the tools they have at hand (Zionts et al.; Murray). Conversely, Canadian libraries face difficulties in implementing a well-rounded program to educate both the patients and the information professionals in locating and promoting health information for their diverse populations (Parker et al.).

Promoting health literacy skills requires an understanding of their conceptual comprehension, as well as cultural context. In a multicultural society, culture and language have a major impact on whether individuals can understand the health information that is available (Parker et al.). Multilingual resources aid in helping new Canadians understand Canada’s health care system. One way to improve communication for new Canadian citizens is to develop multilingual resources online. There is no single source for multilingual health information for immigrants in Canada. Consequently, health librarians, health professionals, and public librarians may face additional challenges in trying to assist these patrons (Stampino). Other demographics to consider are different age groups such as teens and seniors, both of whom present unique health concerns and computer proficiencies.

Other barriers standing in the way of librarian-patron health-related interactions are ethical in nature. Many librarians are concerned about ethics but may be unaware of the liabilities involved and the types of information they should be providing (Spang & Baker). Many librarians may feel uncertain about their ability to provide the correct type of information without providing actual medical advice (Murray). Patrons may also need to understand what role a librarian can play in their health information queries. Those who are hesitant in asking questions of a personal nature should be made aware that librarians are meant to provide a non-judgmental and comfortable environment where they can freely ask questions (Borman & Mackenzie).

**Education and Collaboration**

With insufficient training in the use of search tools such as MedlinePlus and PubMed, some health professionals and consumers may feel ill-equipped to search for health information. Answering health queries at the library information desk can be daunting for both the librarian and the patron (Block).

Awareness is another obstacle. There is very little promotional information in public libraries about how to obtain health literature or where to access it (Block). Canadian libraries are generally not organized around health information services due to the broader demands of public-information needs and queries (Wood et al.). However, as people begin to play a larger role in searching for their own health information, outreach by public librarians should be given greater priority. One issue, however, is that librarians themselves might not have sufficient knowledge or foresight to answer a health question or may be uncomfortable with the level of information they have available. Public librarian training is not often described at any length in the literature,
but outreach efforts generally include training on PubMed and MedlinePlus; one study found that 94% of public librarians continued to use MedlinePlus three months post-training (a 12% increase) (Smith). Smith reports on the awareness of consumer health resources and found that there were several interpretations of the definition of “consumer health.” Among participants, Smith found low awareness of the National Network of Libraries of Medicine, the activities of the National Library of Medicine (NLM), and confusion over differences between MedlinePlus and MEDLINE.

Clearly, educating the public and information professionals about health information as a tool of empowerment is essential. The average patron will not have expert search skills or even know what comprises health literacy (Gillaspy). Some patrons may be aware of the best consumer health websites but may feel unable to interpret any medical information they find there (Skopeija, Whipple & Richwine). Many public librarians feel they lack the training needed to confidently assist people with medical queries. Training librarians to be proficient with medical literature will help develop their confidence levels in aiding patrons to locate health information and in building their own health literacies (Smith). It is imperative to educate patrons about the services offered by public libraries in answering health queries. Librarians possess the skills to find information but need to understand the language in which to search. A lack of health literacy skills limits the effectiveness of health literature dissemination (Parker et al.).

Educational programs can be created in the form of pamphlets or posters available at doctors’ offices and public spaces. Some consumers have the sense that most information is available online. Librarians must remind patrons that access to certain resources costs money, and information found for free online should be subject to critical evaluation. Raising patron awareness about resources, and who may be developing them, will aid in understanding the authority of the information. Sites created by governments can be thought of as valid and supported by citizens, but websites sponsored by companies in the health industry may present in a way that could be biased (Block). Patrons should be wary and learn how to be discerning in their search for information.

Collaboration between medical professionals and information professionals is a key step in getting the correct information out to the public. These professions need to collaborate to help patients identify reliable sources; a compendium of information should be collected to provide ease of access for both librarians and patients. This would also decrease the amount of work that is being replicated across fields (Parker et al.; Picerno). All libraries providing health information, including government, hospital, academic, and public, should work independently and collaboratively to provide information to the public (Borman & Mackenzie). During health crises like the SARS epidemic of 2003, librarians proved to be an asset when providing accurate and timely information. Public libraries tend to be one of the first places of contact for general public inquiries on infectious diseases and emerging illnesses (Harris et al.).

Collaboration between health information organizations such as the NLM and public libraries has proven to be successful. The NLM’s pilot project in 1998 sought to share
ideas about the role of public libraries in consumer health and to get feedback regarding NLM’s health information services. This project identified many issues about the provision and evaluation of health information services to the public; it also coincided with the NLM’s decision to make its databases freely available to the public. The use of MEDLINE has since exploded with an estimated one third of total users from the general public. The pilot project, formally started in 1998, also coincided with the release of MedlinePlus, one of the largest consumer health information sources of its kind in the world (Wood et al.).

Conclusion

The research suggests that public librarians play a major role in the dissemination of health information. We encourage the education and funding of health information outreach programs to the Canadian public. More research should be done to evaluate the valuable role that Canadian public librarians play in raising the level of health literacy awareness. The Internet plays a major role in the dissemination of health information; however, the public needs to be better informed about the negative and positive aspects of searching for health information on the web. Canadian public librarians should be encouraged to take a more active role in providing authoritative health information, so that the public can have greater control over their health and to engage in lifelong learning about health issues they may confront. Collaboration with Canadian practitioners and health associations such as Health Canada should also be fostered to promote awareness of how the public library can help in meeting health information needs across the country.

Works Cited


**Canadian Consumer Health Websites**

- [Canadian Public Libraries gateway](#)
- [Canadian Virtual Health Library website](#)
- [Consumer health libraries in Canada](#)
- [Consumer Health Information Providers Interest Group (CHIPIG)](#)