
*Answering Consumer Health Questions* advises readers about how to cultivate and maintain the most appropriate demeanour, body language, vocabulary and professional ethic for use when answering health-related reference questions. The work assumes that the provision of high-quality health information to library users is a given and asserts that the style in which health reference is delivered is equally important to the overall success of this type of service. The author, Michele Spatz, Director of the Planetree Health Resource Center, also draws upon her experiences managing a medical library to create a behavioural overview of individuals seeking health information. Typifying the actions of information seekers under stress due to serious health issues serves to highlight the importance of the approach to service used by medical library staff, while conversely demonstrating that reference service is an interaction that depends equally upon a library user's capacities to receive information at a particular moment.

The work's behavioural perspective on health reference is explored in seven chapters. Topics discussed include outreach, promotion, communication strategies, professional ethics, legal issues concerning the provision of health information, serving diverse user groups, difficult patrons, and stress management. Each chapter contains italicized vignettes to demonstrate concepts, exhibit sections that list relevant information sources or provide examples to support a specific topic, a summary, references and usually a list of suggested additional reading. Resources highlighted in the exhibit sections are generally consumer focused: often they are information sources to recommend to patrons or they provide sample questions, or surveys to use with patrons. The additional readings are directed towards librarians and expand upon topics covered in the chapter. Section headings within chapters are in large bold text and the layout style is suggestive of a workbook. This, in combination with the author's avoidance of complicated medical terminology makes the volume very approachable and an easy read.

Noticeable difficulties with the volume include the simplistic guidance offered on many topics and a basic confusion over its target audience. For example, a solution provided to deal with the emotional stress of library users illustrates the unsophisticated nature of some of the content, "Show you are in touch with and care about their feelings by making gentle eye contact and nodding appropriately as they speak," (p. 4). The preface describes the book's content as "...geared especially toward librarians who do not provide this type of information on a day-to-day basis," (p. ix) but the lack of examples and discussion about health reference service outside the context of a medical library does not support this assertion. Chapter seven's exploration of stress management concerns strategies for coping with the emotional effects of constantly
assisting seriously ill patrons or their loved ones and it is this discussion of burnout that indicates that the work would be of most interest to new or mid-career medical library staff.

As well, Canadian readers will have to consider the effects of the American health system on the content and presentation of information. For example, the volume’s title indicates the difference as one can imagine that the expectations placed on hospital library staff would be higher when library users are "health consumers" paying enormous costs for medical services. Still, many reference librarians will find the work helpful, particularly chapters three and four as they introduce the legal issues surrounding the provision of health reference service. The most salient point from these chapters is the importance of library staff not interpreting health information for library users. Those individuals unable to understand the information provided must either be directed to sources better matched to their literacy level or advised to speak with their doctor. This discussion of not assisting information seekers with interpretation and not offering personal opinion about doctors or medical treatments is quite valuable as it differentiates health reference service from fulfilling other, less consequential information needs. A librarian is not likely to be sued over voicing an informal opinion about a work of fiction, but they can be if they express their personal thoughts about a doctor or treatment.

Unless considering employment in a medical or hospital library, the volume should not be the first book read on health reference services. The scope of the work is quite narrow and there are other titles that can address broader reader interests and concerns. For example, the 2002 publication The Public Librarian’s Guide to Providing Consumer Health Information by Barbara Casini and Andrea Kenton, which provides a comprehensive overview of health reference service in the public library context or the more recent 2008 update to the essential, Introduction to Reference Sources in the Health Sciences, Fifth Edition by Jeffrey T. Huber would be better introductory resources. Despite its varied focus, Answering Consumer Health Questions would still be a useful purchase for the Canadian health reference librarian. New librarians working in a hospital or health sciences library will find this volume most useful as it effectively covers basic patron concerns and discusses the importance of self-care for those regularly providing health reference service.

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