

Health libraries a vital contribution to ...health

Stephen Due, Geelong Hospital Library

Libraries in the health sector may be found in hospitals (public and private), research institutes, health-related government departments and tertiary education institutions, and professional colleges and associations. Hospital libraries are in the front line of health sector libraries, in that they provide information at the interface with the 'consumer' whose health is the ultimate reason for all these organisations. However all four aspects of the health scene — clinical activity, research, education, and organisation — are represented in varying proportions in all health sciences libraries.

Health sciences libraries provide sophisticated services in what has become a very specialised field of librarianship. They are highly automated, reflecting the substantial and increasing reliance on electronic indexes and resources, including serials, on CD-ROM and on the Internet, and so have a high level of productivity relative to the number of staff employed. As document suppliers they perform a vital role in making the vast array of health sciences literature

available to their clients in both paper and electronic formats. Within Australia, the health sciences library network provides a very cost-effective resource-sharing framework which has been proven to be far cheaper and more efficient than commercial document suppliers — and has all the added advantages to organisations which libraries provide.

Libraries are a vital current awareness and continuing education tool for health professionals. Their organisations benefit, not only

from the direct contribution which libraries make to patient care, research, teaching and staff professional development, but also from having an efficient entry point to what would otherwise be an overwhelmingly complex range of information resources. Highly-paid professional staff could waste many hours obtaining information which an on-site library can provide in minutes.

The health sector is an environment where currency of information is important — so much so that medical textbooks now carry a printed warning that the information they contain may be outdated. It is often not appreciated that the librarian is the only person in the health sector organisation whose brief is to be aware of, and provide access to, the current information resources so vital to the organisation's daily life. A scientific study in Rochester, New York in 1991 demonstrated conclusively that information provided by hospital libraries in particular had a direct effect on patient care, frequently enabling health professionals to improve treatments, or to avoid the necessity for expensive surgery or diagnostic tests.

The librarian has a unique range of knowledge and skills, which are indispensable to modern health professionals. Health sciences libraries are not just repositories for books and databases, but are highly service-oriented. A library in a hospital, a research institute, or a professional college, for example, is geared specifically to support the function of the various professionals employed there, and to assist in achieving the overall objectives of the organisation.

Increasing pressure on health service organisations to justify expenditure, to recover costs, and to defend the treatments they offer on both medical and economic grounds, means that they must have up-to-the-minute knowledge of current, proven practices in many specialties. The accreditation processes undergone by hospitals require them to maintain an adequate library and information service for patient care and for formal clinical training conducted in the organisation. For example, hospitals which train surgeons are required to provide a library service adequate to the information needs of surgical trainees.

In addition, the move towards evidence-based health care requires organisations which deliver health care to be able to demonstrate the scientific validity of what they do, and the library plays an important role in this validation process. ■



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ALIA Special Libraries Section (Qld Group)

QUEENSLAND SPECIAL LIBRARIAN OF THE YEAR 1998 AWARD

Aims

- To recognise an information professional who has demonstrated outstanding achievement within information services;
- To promote the profession of information services to the wider community;
- To encourage membership of Australian Library and Information Association (ALIA) and active involvement in divisional activities.

Selection criteria

Suitable candidates exhibit the following criteria:

- (a) Willingness to share professional expertise and to participate in formal and informal networking activities.
- (b) Evidence of efficient and effective management practices.
- (c) Demonstration of successful promotion of the library and/or information service resulting in the achievement of a high profile with an educated and satisfied clientele.
- (d) Evidence of professional involvement, either past or present, in ALIA divisional activities. Details of involvement may also include a list of published materials.

Conditions and nomination

The conditions are set out in the policies and procedures. For copies of this and nominations forms, please contact:

Imelda Ryan, QHSS Library, PO Box 594, Archerfield 4108
Telephone: (07) 3274 9043

or see our website at: <http://www.alia.org.au/~qldspec/index.html>

Nominations must be received by the selection committee by 1 June 1998.

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