



Health and Medical Libraries: changing times, emerging roles

Health libraries comprise one of the major groups of special libraries in Australia. There are currently 418 self-described health/medical libraries in Australia, comprising approximately 12% of the total number of libraries (5078) registered with the NLA's Australian Library Gateway. There is a broad range of employment contexts for health librarians, and professional roles and responsibilities for this group are changing in response to trends in the health sector in Australia.

As reported in an earlier issue of *inCite* (Hallam, May 2010), the ALIA group Health Libraries Australia is currently engaged in a research project with two main aims: to determine the future skills requirements for the health library workforce in Australia, and to develop a structured, modular education framework (post-graduate qualification and continuing professional development structure) for health librarians to meet these requirements. Part of this research has involved conducting two online surveys, one of individual health librarians and one of health library managers, with the aim of compiling information about the current and likely future professional roles and responsibilities of Australian health librarians. While the results of those surveys will be reported in depth elsewhere, it is interesting to look at some preliminary survey results which provide a snapshot of Australian health libraries.

The largest proportion of respondents to the surveys served hospital-based clients, with universities, research institutes, and government departments following in decreasing proportions. Many health libraries served a mix of hospital and university clients. Smaller categories included dentistry (usually in combination with medical libraries), consumer health services, professional associations and colleges, pharmacy libraries and drug companies, primary care, pathology, and health informatics. Those respondents who fell into the category of 'others' provided comments indicating that they served areas such as allied and community health, indigenous health, disability, health administration, private health services, complementary or alternative health, and health sciences education. Nearly all respondents indicated that their library served a mix of clients. The range of areas of the health sector served by health libraries in Australia is an indicator of the breadth of the sector, and the potential for different roles for health librarians depending on their employment context.

The range of responses to the question "What is your current job title?" in the individual survey also illustrates the range of professional roles filled by Australian health librarians. As expected, the largest proportion of respondents described themselves as librarians, followed by library managers and liaison librarians. However among the respondents there were also the following job titles: clinical librarian; clinical training librarian; health information officer; information specialist; library and knowledge manager; librarian, archivist and records management officer; library technician/IT and graphic design officer; policy and research officer; professional research officer; project officer – clinical knowledge resources; senior medical writer; and web content manager. This range of job titles indicates that health librarians are expanding the scope of their professional roles and responsibilities beyond the traditional definition of health librarian.

However all health librarians, regardless of their employment context or job title, retain a common role in supporting the training of Australia's health workforce, the delivery of health care, and the quality of patient care. Health librarians provide a range of services to healthcare professionals including expert, value-added search services, management of health information resources, and instruction in health information literacy skills. An emerging specialist role for health librarians is developing via the establishment of clinical librarian positions. Clinical librarians typically work as part of the health care team answering requests for clinical information which is used to provide optimum clinical care, or they may work with clinicians to develop evidence-based

guidelines, policies, and procedures.

Besides working with health professionals, many health librarians also work with patients, carers, and consumers who are seeking information about their own medical care. Thus, health librarians provide high-quality, patient-centred information through consumer health organisations such as Alzheimers Australia (<http://www.alzheimers.org.au/>), or via online portals such as HealthInsite (<http://www.healthinsite.gov.au>).

Delivery of health care in Australia is under scrutiny at present, as illustrated by the Commonwealth government's plan to implement the National Health and Hospitals Reform Commission's blueprint for reform. At present it is unclear if, or how, these reforms will affect health librarianship. However two other major initiatives in health have the potential to reshape health librarians' roles and responsibilities into the future. The first of these is the establishment of a National Health Workforce Taskforce and a National Clinical Training Authority, and the move towards national registration for all health professionals. The challenge for health librarians is to be part of this process and stake a claim to be considered as health professionals rather than administrative or support staff, and to be part of the education and training framework which will have to be developed to support ongoing professional development and accreditation for the health workforce.

The second initiative likely to impact on health librarians' roles into the future is the implementation of the National eHealth Strategy, one aspect of which is integration of decision-support clinical knowledge resources with the electronic health record at the point of care. A further aspect of the Strategy is creation of a national health knowledge portal. Both these initiatives will create opportunities for health librarians to provide expertise in selection, management, customisation and evaluation of knowledge resources, including consultation within a multidisciplinary team, and training health professionals and health consumers to use these tools effectively.

It is a mark of the maturity of the profession that in 2009 Australia successfully hosted the 10th International Congress on Medical Librarianship (<http://www.icml2009.com/>). For those librarians with an interest in health librarianship, the aliaHEALTH elist (<http://lists.alia.org.au/mailman/listinfo/aliaHEALTH/>) is a great way to keep upto date with developments in health librarianship. The future for health librarianship in Australia is both challenging and exciting. New roles are emerging and health librarians are well positioned to develop and expand their scope of practice to encompass those roles.

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