

Challenges and Opportunities of a Health Science College Library: Experience of the Faculty of Health Sciences at Moi University- Kenya

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Abstract

This paper discusses the current environment in which health information is disseminated through the college library at the faculty of health sciences in Moi University, Kenya. It also highlights the emerging trends that have influenced the provision of health information. The hurdles that compound document delivery and possible solutions are examined.

1. INTRODUCTION

Health care workers such as clinicians, health policy-makers, frontline health workers, and other allied health professionals in Africa need access to quality, appropriate and up-to-date information on health aspects to keep informed and make timely clinical as well as other health care decisions. In medical field, new ideas, new instruments, new drugs, methods of treatment and even new diseases (AIDS, SARS, etc.,) are ever coming to light as research and human knowledge expands. Most health care workers in developing countries work with little access to information. Developing nations like Kenya require every form of conscious effort to build and maintain a steady flow of information for use by health workers in the interest of better health care.

A medical school can only achieve its mission and goals if doctors and other health personnel are knowledgeable about diseases and the latest methods of patient care. A library of a teaching hospital is the primary source of information needed by health-care workers. A medical school library must therefore place emphasis in providing information that will be useful in improving the

health status of the patients who seek healthcare at the hospital.

2. INFORMATION DELIVERY

In Africa, although health care environment is full of information, the sector lacks the capacity to discover, communicate or use the information effectively. This is partly due to apathy and under utilization of information technology that has opened up numerous new ways leading to production, analyzation, data dissemination and health knowledge. Therefore it is only through awareness of what has been undertaken can further advances be made. Thanks to the development of networks such as African Index Medicus (AIM) which now facilitates information to health care workers. The AIM was initiated by the Association for Health Information and Libraries in Africa (AHILA) to facilitate the collaboration and exchange of unpublished (grey) literature and published health information generated in and about Africa. The mission of AIM is to improve access of bibliographic and other information sources relating to health issues of African countries through co-operation at national and international level.

Precisely, the health information systems (HIS) provide information on medical breakthroughs, epidemic, medical facilities and services—both technical and non-technical to medical personnel, researchers and general public. This kind of information is essential as it may be required by different people, at different times to address diverse medical or health issues. Thus with the introduction of information technology in health services and medical schools, it is now possible to exchange knowledge between computer networks such as Healthnet based at different teaching hospitals. Electronic bulletins such as weekly *Health Net News*, which provides current abstracts from leading journals as well as full text articles can be assessed. The World Wide Web, a computer network beyond the library peripherals offers exciting opportunities for continuing education and patient care. Metcalfe, *et al*³ and Coulehan, *et al*² observed that medical information can today be accessed in a multimedia form by any user at any time. The duo separately reported that need of a multimedia database of information with the potential to link academia and primary care through the internet had been felt in Africa as well.

Current trends indicate that in order to manage and deliver health services effectively, appropriate information on health trends is essential. In favour of such background, a library in a teaching hospital should be a source of information for the health care team in the hospital and the medical school. Library services are found necessary to support many health professionals who may require information for continuing education. This calls for dissemination of timely and appropriate information on health management, aimed at critical health information to health care workers in a convenient and timely manner, focussing on patient care as the ultimate goal.

2.1 Building Bridges

Health care librarians of now and the future must be partners in the technological and information changes sweeping the health care community and not just supportive

service. This could be implemented through provision of innovative, client-oriented services necessary for high-quality patient care. In order to survive in the changing information business environment, health information professionals must provide top customer service, attuned to the needs, requirements of health workers, which demands for collaboration in fund raising and health provision with other workers. The spirit of collaboration has been witnessed in the US where clinical librarians have participated as members to the patient care team to identify questions raised in the course of medical rounds and then searching for the literature or information appropriate articles and provide them to the physicians and other health professionals on the team¹. Such partnership is likely to increase library visibility and impact on other stake holders.

2.2 Moi University Faculty of Health Sciences Library-Experiences

The Faculty of Health Sciences at Moi University is a host to one of the current three branch libraries that makes up the university library system (i.e., besides chepkoilel campus library and the school of environmental science library). This faculty of health science is located in the middle of Eldoret town, 35 km away from the University's Main Campus and is also about 360 km north west of Nairobi, the Kenyan capital. It's present situation was found convenient taking into consideration the location of government general hospital and the environ populace. Suffice it to say that it is one of the best equipped library among the medical/health schools in East Africa.

2.2.1 Role of Medical Library

Given the centrality of information in health care and management, health information services must become patient-focussed, integral, and indispensable in the professional life of the physicians and other health workers. In order to create an impact on the clinicians, nurses and administrators, information professionals must develop services that help both general and highly

specialized information needs. Like other tools, information is not useful if it is not available when it is needed. Having been built and set on the lines US and other European countries, medical schools including those in Africa are introducing problem-based learning (PBL). The faculty of health sciences, Moi university now has a multimedia library that holds both print and electronic information resources including those of audio-visuals. Since the introduction of internet and e-mail services, the library has become quite popular with the users who are more than 600 and include the faculty and students plus a few non-teaching staff. In addition, the library provides the book box library that is useful to students when they are undertaking Community Based Services (COBES).

The library staff at the health school noted that the faculty doctors and other paramedical staff did not have time to consult the library's valuable medical resources due to tight schedule in ward rounds, meetings and teachings, came up with a time saving mode—a current awareness service namely 'Faculty of Health Science (FHS) Alert'. This service aims to provide medics/clinicians with abstracts downloaded from CD-ROM-Medline based user profile strategy for keeping users abreast in their work. User defined search formulation are stored and run as new update appears. This service centres on public health issues, with emphasis on diagnosis, complications, management, prevention and control of the diseases. Review articles are always given serious consideration. Based on reading the abstracts, the user can make a request for a hard copy of a journal article.

The creation of a local database is another activity that is undertaken by the library staff. This database includes abstracts and citations of conference and research reports produced in Kenya, and indexes articles from local newspapers. These services have increased the image of the library and has also strengthened content development. The authors observe that for libraries to prosper particularly this time of severe financial budget cuts from the exchequer, it is necessary for them to make an impact by

becoming producers of information that not only suits their environment but also goes beyond their library peripherals for others to use. Certainly, this may attract the attention of their institutions.

Towards the end of the 20th century and now in the initial phases of the 21st century, the faculty of health sciences library at Moi University strives to focus on the needs of the faculty and the hospital community while a keen interest in users needs and perceptions is taken into consideration. To improve its products and services, this library encourages users to seek, complain and suggest on what they best think the library can proffer towards their needs .

2.3 Users Skills

Traditional models for evaluating library services are largely based on whether or not the library, its resources and its tools can assist users to find the items or information they need. Technology has enabled libraries to expand access to information resources beyond the physical walls, both for the library staff and for users. In some cases this has meant that the library no longer plays the role of intermediary in the delivery of information. Hence following the aforesaid attributes and use of technology, right skills are essential. To meet the ever increasing and changing learning needs, the library staff teach (theory and practice) information-seeking that support PBL. Among the learning resource skills that the staff embark on include how to access databases, use of search engines, internet browsers, communication through e-mail and knowledge about use of computers besides the traditional bibliographical databases. An impromptu survey made by staff, accrued that users have appreciated the approach, that the staff has laid for them in these kind of laboratory nature of skills.

3. CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES OF ICTS

One of the major influences on educational role of the health science librarian has been the recent technological advances and application in information and

communication(ICTs) technologies to manage the growing amount of health information. The wide spread use of healthnet, internet, and the promise of telemedicine are transforming the world of scholarly communication and allowing scattered systems throughout the world to be interlinked. Multimedia system and the electronic journal are already in medical libraries with all their implications. Medicine, too, has been undergoing its own technological revolution, giving birth to medical informatics. All these technologies, each with new parameters for information management call for ICT skills training.

One thing to note is that African countries have a wealth of information that is often valued and pertinent to the unique medical problems distinct to their countries though not widely known. Now the challenge is to take advantage of new technology and develop the appropriate tools and networks that would facilitate access and dissemination of knowledge to health workers. Thus the task of building a strong academia that consists of undergraduate, postgraduate and research program can not be accomplished without strong library services in terms of better teaching materials and equipments.

Moi University faculty of health sciences that follows a problem based learning (PBL) curriculum demands a variety of resources viz. textbooks, journals and electronic information resources and anatomy models. However, due to heavy budget cuts, medical schools in Africa including the Moi university one, have been forced to cut subscriptions to scholarly journals which has quite affected the quality of health library services.

3.1 Tackling the Challenges

The advances in technology and the institutional wide focus on information management have given librarians of health sciences the opportunities to take a more central position in education process. The innovative curriculum problem based learning, and the independent sharing rely heavily on effective use of information resources .This has added librarians opportunities to exert their role in education. These challenges

require librarians to be proactive by assuming the position of both the faculty member and members of health care team.

In contrast with many developing countries, hospitals in Kenya have realized the need to provide patients and the community with health information. Patients are slowly demanding for information to read, challenging the librarians to extend their role to patient education. Therefore to cope up with this challenges, librarians and other information related providers should continually update their skills in learning and adopting new technologies, educational theories and advances in health care field. It is a known fact that the exchequer's financial support can no longer suffice institutional requirements. At the bottom line we must constantly explore new avenues for survival that will facilitate health libraries keep evolving. This may imply strengthening income generating, introducing library levy and an appeal for endowment fund.

3.2 The Way Forward

Health sciences libraries are strategically based to disseminate health information related to health and wellness popularly known as consumer health information (CHI). According to the authors health sciences librarians should consider themselves catalysts for patient education and there should be networking between health organisations, NGOs, health professionals, and librarians. However, in this regard, the Moi university health faculty library is developing a special collection comprising of videos, pamphlets and other ephemeral resources.

Apart from serving the faculty, the library's scope stretches to the surrounding environment and beyond including providing services to nearby sister countries such as Sudan and Uganda. Currently, the library collaborates with Hospice based at Eldoret town and anticipate to develop a resource centre which will maintain a database on palliative care information, and also offer both telephone, internet and referral services to its clientele and beyond.

CONCLUSION

The role of information professionals in response to the explosive growth of biomedical information should include gate keeping, empowering users to access to the assemblage of data banks through information and communication technology (ICT) such as healthnet, internet and telemedicine. They must focus beyond their parent institutions, creating a vision of future health information systems. Information professionals should form part partnership with other stake holders in dealing with a range of issues that challenge health services with a focus on the customers (the patient). Librarians engaged in research projects with health professionals counterparts can change the way health is valued. Health Science should therefore endeavour to meet the new information demands by expanding their research skills and gain expertise beyond the conventional information work. They should forge close relationship with medical researchers, doctors, in the institution, identify their information needs, and formulate the most effective and speedy way of obtaining required information and plan for the transmittal of responses to consumers. At the end of our services is the patient! In a nutshell biomedical information is critical to public health in general, and biomedical research and education in particular are a necessity but a information centre or library as the one at

the health faculty of MOI university Kenya must be behind any successful mission undertaken by the faculty in many aspects.

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