

Meeting Consumer Needs for Health Information: Identifying Best Practices in Consumer Health Reference Interviews

Public libraries provide a no-cost, convenient way for consumers to navigate health information resources and find the information they need to make informed health care decisions. The public library is often the first place many people consult when seeking information on important health topics. The number of health-related questions asked by public library users has steadily increased in the past three decades and escalated exponentially since the late 1990s, with the most dramatic growth in questions about specific diseases, medical treatment, medications, and health care systems (Parker & Kreps, 2005). With the Affordable Care Act taking effect recently, it is expected that questions related to health insurance coverage will increase significantly.

Although health information inquiries account for as many as 60% of total reference inquiries at public libraries (Wood et al., 2000), many public librarians are not comfortable or confident responding to these inquiries due to concerns such as provision of misinformation and possible intrusion on user privacy (Borman & McKenzie, 2005). As a result, there is substantial variability in the level of service delivered by public librarians who respond to health information inquiries (Wood et al., 2000). Since consumers rely on the health information they obtain from libraries to make important decisions, public librarians should be adequately prepared to provide that service (Orban, 2005), and professional training on this topic is indispensable (Parker & Kreps, 2005).

In a recent nationwide study aimed at identifying the training needs of public librarians, the investigator for this study found that the consumer health reference interview is one of the top areas where public librarians need training (Luo & Park, 2013). Thus, this study seeks to identify best practices for conducting consumer health reference interviews, which can then be used as the basis to design effective training for public librarians.

Literature Review

During a consumer health reference interview, librarians ask questions of consumers to understand their health information needs and then offer strategies to assist consumers in their information seeking process. According to the Online Dictionary of Library and Information Science (2014), the reference interview is "the interpersonal communication that occurs between a reference librarian and a library user to determine the person's specific information need(s), which may turn out to be different from the reference question as initially posed." Reference interviews may occur in person, by telephone, or electronically (e.g., email or text messaging).

The National Network of Libraries of Medicine believes that consumer health questions present special challenges to the reference interview process (NNLM, 2014), including:

- Consumers may have incomplete information about their health condition and may be unfamiliar with medical terminology.
- The information needed may be about a sensitive issue, such as a mental health condition.
- The consumer may be nervous, embarrassed, upset, and emotional. Often the individual has been newly diagnosed, or a loved one has been newly diagnosed.
- Consumers may have unreasonable expectations. For instance, they may want a straightforward answer to a complex medical question, when in reality, this kind of information may be difficult or impossible to find.
- Consumers may be concerned about confidentiality, anonymity, and security, especially about personal health information transmitted electronically to a librarian.

- Consumers may be confused about the role of the librarian. They might assume that the librarian can advise them on making health care decisions.
- Librarians may be concerned about providing incorrect information or negative information (e.g., the expected life span for someone with a specific medical condition).

Limited research has been done regarding how librarians can overcome these challenges during consumer health reference interviews, and existing literature is not based on empirical studies. Benedetti (2002) described a model three-hour training session for public librarians about consumer health reference interviews, focusing mainly on the searching element of reference services. Allcock (2000) proposed a series of techniques for public librarians to improve the effectiveness of consumer health reference interviews, with an emphasis on providing adequate follow-up, protecting confidentiality, and taking measures to avoid personal liability. In the only study to look specifically at training for librarians who work in medical libraries, Thomas (2005) suggested the use of dialogue scripts by hospital librarians during the interview process.

Empirical research is needed to provide a current and well-grounded view on how public librarians can successfully conduct consumer health reference interviews. This study will examine the experiences of librarians who work in medical libraries – experts at providing consumer health information, in order to identify best practices for consumer health reference interviews. Insight from these specialists can help public librarians, generalists who respond to reference questions on many topics.

Research Goals and Significance

Public librarians have identified the need for training regarding consumer health reference interviews. The best practices identified in this study will provide new knowledge regarding how to address the challenges inherent in consumer health reference transactions and successfully conduct reference interviews. Thus, study findings will provide insight to practitioners as they seek to improve their reference services. Educators can also draw on this new knowledge as they develop programs that prepare public librarians to provide consumer health information services, including SJSU faculty who teach in the Master of Library and Information Science program, as well as educators who provide professional development programs. Better prepared librarians can deliver health information services that more effectively meet consumer needs.

Scope of Work and Methodology

This study seeks to identify best practices for consumer health reference interviews by examining the experiences and perceptions of medical librarians – specialists who work at medical libraries and provide health reference services to health professionals and consumers. Although consumers regularly seek health information via local public libraries, they sometimes have access to information through medical libraries, which are often based at hospitals. Professionals who work in medical libraries are experts at responding to health-related inquiries and searching for health information. In addition to holding degrees in librarianship, medical librarians also have degrees and credentials in medical domains. Their experiences will shed light on how to prepare public librarians, who are usually generalists without any specialized education or training in health information service.

The sampling method, probability proportional to size, will be used to select a random sample of U.S. medical libraries in each state. Using the membership directory of National Network of Libraries of Medicine, a total of 300 medical libraries will be sampled from all 50 states.

Each library in the sample will be contacted by email, inviting their librarians to participate in an online survey. The survey will investigate the following variables:

- Demographic variables – library setting and characteristics of the user community
- The barriers respondents encountered during each of the five stages of the reference interview and the actions they took to overcome those barriers
- Experiences answering consumer health questions in each service venue – in-person, telephone, online chat, email, and texting
- Administrative and professional support that librarians received or wish to receive to improve their ability to provide health reference services (e.g., financial support for professional development; workshops organized by professional associations)

Descriptive and inferential statistical analysis will be conducted for close-ended survey questions. For open-ended questions, coding will be performed to detect themes and patterns. As a result, for each reference venue, the combined quantitative and qualitative data will depict successful practices used by medical librarians during all five stages of a consumer health reference interview – approachability, interest, listening/inquiring, searching and follow-up.

Findings will be shared via conference presentations and journal publications, and via an online presentation that will be part of the colloquium series at the SJSU School of Library and Information Science (SLIS), with the colloquia recording freely available via the SLIS website.

Qualifications of Investigator and Budget Justification

Dr. Lili Luo has taught Reference Services courses for SLIS graduate students since 2007. She also co-chairs the school's Program Advisory Committee for reference-related curriculum. Library reference services are her primary research area, and she has published and led multiple research projects in this area. RSCA funds will provide a Spring 2015 course release for Luo.

References

- Allcock, J. C. (2000). Helping public library patrons find medical information – the reference interview. *Public Library Quarterly*, 18(3/4), 21-27.
- Benedetti, J. M. (2002). Strategies for consumer health reference training. *Health Care on the Internet*, 6(4), 63-71.
- Borman, C. B., & McKenzie, P. (2005). Trying to help without getting in their faces: Public library staff descriptions of providing consumer health information. *Reference & User Services Quarterly*, 45(2), 122-46.
- Luo, L. & Park, V. T. (2013). Preparing public librarians for consumer health information service: A nationwide study. *Library and Information Science Research*, 35(4), 255-239.
- National Network of Library of Medicine (NNLM). (2014). *The consumer health reference interview and ethical issues*. Retrieved from <http://nnlm.gov/outreach/consumer/ethics.html>
- Online Dictionary of Library and Information Science (2014). Reference interview. Retrieved from http://www.abc-clio.com/ODLIS/odlis_R.aspx#refinterview
- Orban, E. (2005). Health literacy: Challenges and implications for consumer health librarians. *Indiana Libraries*, 24(3), 2-6.
- Parker, R., & Kreps, G. L. (2005). Library outreach: Overcoming health literacy challenges. *Journal of the Medical Library Association*, 93(4), S81-85.
- Thomas, D. A. (2005). The consumer health reference interview. *Journal of Hospital Librarianship*, 5(2), 45-56.
- Wood, F. B., Lyon, B., Schell, M. B., Kitendaugh, P., Cid, V. H., & Siegel, E. R. (2000). Public library consumer health information pilot project: Results of a National Library of Medicine evaluation. *Bulletin of the Medical Library Association*, 88(4), 314-322.