

**Academic Affairs Division – Spring 2014 Proposals**  
**CSU RSCA (Research, Scholarship and Creative Activity) Program**  
**Award period: 7/1/14 – 6/30/15**

**Personal Information**

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**Project Title** Meeting Consumer Needs for Health Information

**Project Abstract** (not to exceed 100 words)

Public libraries are often the first place people go when seeking the information they need to make informed health care decisions, and demand for these services is growing. However, many public librarians lack confidence to respond to health information inquiries and seek training to better assist consumers. The investigator will collect data from medical librarians, experts at providing consumer health information. Through an analysis of that data, she will identify effective practices for conducting consumer health reference interviews and share this new knowledge with practitioners and educators, who can use this insight to design effective training for public librarians.

**Name(s) of Co-PI(s)** (if any): \_\_\_\_\_

**Funding requested:**

- ☒ 0.2 release time for Spring 2015  
☐ up to \$5,000 in RSCA-related expenses

*My signature below indicates that release time for this project has not been funded by another source and that this project will not require any additional department/college/unit resources not specified in this proposal.*

Applicant's signature: \_\_\_\_\_

Date: 04/22/14

*My signature below indicates that I have read this proposal. If funded, this faculty member will be released for the work requested.*

Department Chair/Director's signature: Linda Hain

Date: 04/22/14

Dean's signature: C Bullock

Date: 4/24/14

**Submit complete application (Cover Page, Budget Form and Narrative – see  
General Description and Instructions) with original signatures to  
the Office of Graduate Studies & Research, in care of Jeanine Jones, ADM 223, 0025  
by 5:00 p.m. on Tuesday, April 29, 2014.**

**SAVE**

**PRINT**

**BUDGET FORM FOR CSU RSCA PROPOSALS – Spring 2014**

**WHAT FUNDING ARE YOU REQUESTING? SELECT ONE OF THE FOLLOWING:**

- ☒ 0.2 release time for Spring 2015  
☐ up to \$5,000 in RSCA-related expenses

**IF YOU ARE REQUESTING RSCA-RELATED EXPENSES, PLEASE ITEMIZE YOUR BUDGET:**

**Equipment and Supplies**

(Please itemize, including shipping charges and sales tax.)

Equipment Total \_\_\_\_\_

Supplies Total \_\_\_\_\_

**Travel** Total \_\_\_\_\_

(Please describe trip(s) and itemize estimated costs.)

**Student Assistants** Total \_\_\_\_\_

(Please specify the number of undergraduate and graduate students,  
the number of hours and the hourly rate.)

**Other expenses** Total \_\_\_\_\_

(Please describe/itemize)

**GRAND TOTAL:** \_\_\_\_\_

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### **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**

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