

Health Information Literacy

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Health literacy vs health information literacy

Before continuing, for the purposes of this presentation, it is necessary to distinguish between “health literacy” and “health information literacy”. Health literacy is the ability to understand instructions about treatments. For example if the label on the prescription says “Take three tablets daily”, does this mean take three tablets at the same time or take one tablet three times a day? Health information literacy has a more in-depth scope, and refers to the competencies required to effectively identify, understand, and use good quality health information to make an informed decision.

The Medical Library Association, in America has developed a definition of Health Information Literacy:

“Health Information Literacy is the set of abilities needed to:

- *recognize a health information need;*
 - *identify likely information sources and use them to retrieve relevant information;*
 - *assess the quality of the information and its applicability to a specific situation;*
 - *and analyze, understand, and use the information to make good health decisions.”*
- (Medical Library Association 2003)

Evidence based medicine

The term “information literacy” is fairly new to the health sector, but the concept is widely recognised as it forms a major component of evidence based medicine. EBM was first coined in the early 1990s, and means “integrating individual clinical expertise with the best available external clinical evidence from systematic research” to achieve the best possible patient care. In simpler terms this means clinical expertise together with best research evidence and patient preferences. For health professionals, it means that they have to back up their clinical decisions with the best evidence available. And this is where information literacy skills are essential. Health professionals need to be aware of how to search for good quality information, and they need to be able to appraise the content they find. This takes a long time, and it is a difficult skill to learn. Therefore, health librarians have a key role to play in terms of providing literature searching services and/or training.

Barriers to information literacy in the health sector

There are three main barriers to information literacy in the health sector:

1. Time

During a consultation, a number of clinical questions might arise. However, immediately after the consultation, there will be more patients to see and then there is paperwork to do. So, when do health professionals get the time to find the evidence to support their decision-making?

2. Resources

A number of resources have been developed to improve access to the best evidence, for example, NHS Evidence, TRIP, the Cochrane Library, all providing access to best quality research and guidelines. However, not all staff have access to computers or even libraries. Hospitals attached to universities have greater access to resources compared to the local GP surgery. The NHS does subscribe to a set of core databases and electronic journals, but it is quite small and generalist rather than specialist. There are also differences in the levels of information technology available. The NHS network is considerably slower than the university network, as its priority, quite rightly, is the secure transfer of patient data.

3. Skills

The resources described above make it easier for health professionals to find the best evidence, and do save time, but health professionals still need to know how to use them, and again this requires time.

Solutions: Clinical and Outreach Librarians

As a consequence of EBM and these barriers to information literacy, the health librarian role has significantly changed over the past few years, with the introduction of clinical librarians and outreach librarians.

Clinical librarians work within hospitals, sometimes accompanying ward rounds or being attached to clinical teams. Outreach librarians tend to work within a primary care setting, visiting GP surgeries to deliver training or to provide literature searches. Both roles mean that the health professional does not have to physically visit the library, which can save them considerable time. They can just concentrate on learning how to find the evidence from their own workspace, at a time that is convenient for them. This actually makes it a lot easier for them to apply EBM because they will be learning on more familiar grounds and they can bookmark the relevant resources on their own computers, rather than having to go out to a training session, and then return to their computer and find the resources again. In addition, by being at the “frontline”, librarians can improve their clinical knowledge and provide a more relevant service to their users.

Depending on resources available, training can take a variety of forms, – formal lectures, one-to-one or groups, in libraries or hospitals or GP surgeries, online tutorials, quick ten minute introductory sessions or half-day Finding the Evidence workshops. Information literacy training is also becoming part of the medical student curriculum.

Where possible the sessions are focused around a clinical scenario, preferably chosen by the health professionals being trained so that the session is relevant to them.

Health professionals vs medical students vs patients

In the health sector, information literacy skills are taught at all levels, medical students, frontline staff, healthcare managers, researchers, allied health professionals, etc. and sometimes patients, although access to services for patients varies greatly as they also have access to Patient Advisory Liaison Services.

They all have different requirements. Researchers will need to be taught how to search comprehensively, whereas healthcare managers will need access to other resources such as databases with literature on policy, leadership, and finance, and of course doctors and nurses will need to learn about searching the clinical literature. Health professionals also work in a variety of settings – hospitals, primary care, mental health institutions, teaching hospitals, ambulance trusts, etc., and often require specialist searching skills.

Impact measurement

The actual impact of information literacy skills will be the outcome for the patient and service improvement, although, increasingly, impact of information literacy interventions in the health sector is being measured as part of a formal curriculum with medical students.