



### Librarians' and Information Scientists' Roles in Health Information Literacy: A Review of Literature

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#### Abstract

*In Nigeria as a society, and to every individual, Health literacy is an important aspect to consider. This is due to the fact that a health literate person understands his/her health status, take prevention and control measures of various diseases. Health literacy was commonly conceptualized as a set of knowledge, a set of skills or a hierarchy of functions (functional- interactive- critical). The construct of health literacy covers three broad elements: (1) knowledge of health, healthcare and health systems; (2) processing and using information in various formats in relation to health and healthcare; and (3) ability to maintain health through self- management and working in partnerships with health providers. The paper discusses the roles of librarian in health information literacy for individual to obtain and translate knowledge and information in order to maintain and improve health in appropriate ways. The researcher reviewed several literatures and found out that libraries have a big role to play to ensure that community recognize their information needs, search for relevant information and make use of the information to make informed health decisions. The paper concludes that librarians are ideally placed to raise awareness of the impact on health information literacy and to work with health professionals to embed the use of tools and techniques to improve health literacy into their daily practice. The paper recommends that Medical librarian should develop the public's digital and health literacy skills, and includes it in their services; create health information literacy support programmes for its publics etc.*

**Keywords:** Information literacy, Health literacy, Medical librarian, Health information Literacy

#### 1.1 Introduction

Health education comprises consciously constructed opportunities for learning involving some form of communication designed to improve *health literacy*, including improving knowledge, and

developing life skills which are conducive to individual and *community health*. Health literacy occurs when a society provides accurate health information and services that people can easily find, understand, and use to inform their decisions and actions” (ODPHP 2020).

People's ability to obtain health-related information is considered important for how well they can take care of themselves. The concept of health information literacy, typically used within health sciences and health communication, is often defined as 'the degree to which individuals have the capacity to obtain, process, and understand basic health information and services needed to make appropriate health decisions (Nutbeam, 2008)

In the health care sector, particularly the Nigeria, where printed information is frequently provided, this may lead to extreme frustration on the part of the patient. People with speech, language, visual, hearing and intellectual disabilities experience even greater challenges when they need to apply high-level health information literacy skills (Hester & Stevens-Ratchford, 2009).

Librarian participation in the dissemination of health information to the society in general, enable people of the society have access to information that is appropriate for their needs and play an active role in their health and well-being. The libraries and librarians can contribute to the health of their communities they serve through their involvement with health literacy initiatives.

## 2.1 Review of Related Literature

### 2.2 Concept of Health Literacy and Health Information Literacy

Health literacy is all about the possession of knowledge about health. Liu, et al (2020), defined health literacy as the ability of an individual to obtain and translate knowledge and information in order to maintain and improve health in a way that is appropriate to the individual and system contexts. This definition highlights the diversity of needs from different individuals and the importance of interactions between individual consumers, healthcare providers

and healthcare systems. World Health Organisation (2012) recognizes health literacy as an outcome of effective health education, which increases individual's capacities to access and use health information in order to make appropriate health decisions and thereby maintain basic health. Health literacy is a societal responsibility and "effective responses to health literacy issues can improve health outcomes and reduce health inequities" (World Health Organization, 2015).

Health literacy is the ability to obtain, process, and understand health information to make informed decisions about health care (National Institute of Health, 2012). According to the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services' (HHS, 2022) [Healthy People 2030 initiative](#), health literacy involves the information and services that people need to make well-informed health decisions. They identify many aspects of health literacy to include:

- **Personal health literacy** is the degree to which individuals have the ability to find, understand, and use information and services to inform health-related decisions and actions for themselves and others. Examples of personal health literacy include understanding prescription drug instructions, understanding doctor's directions and consent forms, and the ability to navigate the complex healthcare system.
- **Organizational health literacy** is the degree to which organizations equitably enable individuals to find, understand, and use information and services to inform health-related decisions and actions for themselves and others. Examples of organizational health literacy include simplifying the process to schedule appointments, using the Teach-Back method to ensure patient comprehension, and providing

communications in the appropriate language, reading level and format.

- **Digital health literacy**, as defined by the World Health Organization (WHO 2019), is the ability to seek, find, understand, and appraise health information from electronic sources and apply the knowledge gained to addressing or solving a health problem. Examples of digital health literacy include accessing your electronic health record, communicating electronically with your health care team, ability to discern reliable online health information, and using health and wellness apps. In addition, health information literacy is a societal responsibility and “effective responses to health literacy issues can improve health outcomes and reduce health inequities” (World Health Organization, 2015).

### 2.3 Health Information Literacy

The importance of high-quality, usable health information has never been more starkly apparent than during the COVID-19 pandemic (Paakkari & Okan, 2020). Not having the information we need when we need it leaves us wanting. Not knowing where to look for that information leaves us powerless (Lois, 2007). Information literacy is the ability to access, process and use information effectively. The American Library Association (2016) defines information literacy as the set of abilities to “recognize when information is needed and have the ability to locate, evaluate, and use effectively the needed information.” Information literacy is assumed to be the knowledge and skills necessary to correctly identify information needed to perform a specific task or unravel a problem, proficiently search for information, organize or reorganize it, interpret and advice on it once

it is found and retrieved (e.g. downloaded), evaluate the accuracy and consistency of the information, including morally acknowledging the sources from whence it was obtained, communicated and presented (Ajegbomogun & Ajegbomogun, 2015). It is the combination of research skills, critical thinking skills, computer skills, computer technology skills, and communication skills.

Health Information Literacy as defined by the Medical Library Association (2014) 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 information and its applicability to a specific situation; and analyze, understand, and use the information to make good health decision”. Health Information Literacy is essential for seeking preventive health, appropriate management of disease, and improving the wellbeing of citizens as a whole.

**It is about having the skills required by people to effectively recognize:**

- what they need to know about their condition and treatment options,
- how to appraise the information to ensure it is good quality, and relevant to their personal context, and then
- how to use the information with their health professionals so that they can make an informed decision that suits their needs.

Limited health information literacy can result in poorer health outcomes, unhealthy lifestyles, increased incidence of chronic conditions and mortality, greater use of emergency services, and increased hospital stays.

### 2.4 Medical Librarian

It is a general knowledge that the library is the store house of knowledge which means that the librarians are knowledge

keepers. This can be inferred in the terms of medical library as the place where health knowledge is kept and consequently their librarians are the health information keepers. Understanding what this health information is and its importance to the clinic care provides leverage to understanding the vital role of medical librarians in health institutions especially in this digital age.

Digitization has succeeded in changing the role of the medical librarian and extending their limit beyond the walls of the physical space, moving the information to the clinician's workplace as opposed to waiting for them to come to the library which is something that many healthcare professionals may increasingly struggle to find time to do.

It is because of this that medical librarians are becoming even more relevant and important to clinicians. Many clinicians struggle to find the answers that they need and require training and assistance in searching database to research evidence to answer clinical questions. In many ways, the librarians' role is increasingly moving towards becoming a trusted adviser, providing the collective ability to integrate services and practices into teaching and learning processes. Librarians have the opportunity to become part of the frontline service providers which can be incredibly rewarding in improving patient care, as a result of their role (Uzoagba, et al 2017).

### **3.1 The Roles of the Librarians on Health Information Literacy**

Librarians and information scientist currently carry out important services to help both healthcare providers and patients by ensuring they have easy access to information when needed. They works tirelessly behind the scene with selection, acquisition, licenses, hardware requirements and software ensuring the necessary information is easily available for researchers and to support patients to understand healthcare information. Health

information literacy is an area where librarians and information scientist, from all sectors, whether medical, public or academic, are in a strong position to support because they already have the resources and relevant skills (Bragard et al, 2017).

Some of the traditional roles conducted by the librarian in the era of health care information as outlined by Femi and Oyinade (2017) are as follows.

- Collection development and acquisition of health care materials: to select and purchase material related to health care - printed journals, abstracts and indexes, monographs, etc.
- Cataloguing and classification: to organize and provide access to health care information - physically and via lists and catalogues.
- Reference work: to advise health care information users and to provide and facilitate quick and easy access to health care information.
- Preservation, conservation and archiving: to archive, preserve and conserve health care information in perpetuity.

Most patients who are well informed are more likely to comply with the treatment regime which may result in improved health, reduced length of stay, and hospital admissions. People benefit from having access to good quality health information because it enables them to make informed decisions and follow their treatment regimens more effectively and safely.

### **3.2 The Roles of Medical Librarians in Healthcare Information Management**

Maimonides, a Spanish philosopher said "Give a man a fish and you feed him for a day; teach a man to fish and you feed him for a lifetime." This quote reflects the importance of health information literacy, because if you find the information for the patient, their query will be satisfied, but if you teach them to search and



appraise, they will be able to make informed decisions throughout their care pathways. Librarians can signpost people to the best sources, and teach them to search, retrieve, and appraise what they find. Their function includes the following;

- Promoting the importance of health literacy, including functional personalized information, which all people can make sense of and act on, to assist them to make informed choices, share in decisions about their care and treatment, take control and improve the quality of their life.
- Sharing and communicating good practice.
- Developing the public's digital and health literacy skills,

According to De Brún (2019), Medical librarians have the skills associated with evidence-based practice, as it is embedded in their roles, their primary function being teaching health professionals how to find and appraise the evidence. They equally have access to the relevant information sources, while public and school librarians are a trusted source within their communities, and understand the local context. Working in partnership would improve access to good quality health information at a location accessible to local people, who most likely would not have access to medical libraries.

### **Conclusion**

As we see through these case studies, librarians are ideally placed to raise awareness of the impact on health information literacy and to work with health professionals to embed the use of tools and techniques to improve health literacy into their daily practice. Through these initiatives, they have not only raised awareness of health literacy issues but also raised the profile of their

services and the highlighted the contribution that Library and Knowledge Services can make to improving the quality and accessibility of health care information for patients and the public.

### **Recommendations**

Based on the above discussion, the following recommendations were made:

- Medical librarian should develop the public's digital and health literacy skills, and includes it in their services.
- Create health information literacy support programmes for its publics
- Health care librarians should support patients and users of health care information by developing readable materials for easy understanding.
- Promoting the importance of health literacy, including functional personalized information, which all people can make sense of and act on, to assist them to make informed choices, share in decisions about their care and treatment, take control and improve the quality of their life.
- Sharing and communicating good practice.
- There is need for health care librarians to carry out research in the areas of best practice so as to promote health education.
- Librarians should try as much as possible to discharge their duties and roles as a specialist in information acquisition.
- Librarians should enlighten the users of health care information on how to access quality information.

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