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# Building Community Bridges for Health: Consumer Health Librarians as Health Advocates

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## ABSTRACT

CONSUMER HEALTH LIBRARIANS can and must function as health advocates within their communities, fostering and strengthening local health initiatives by joining community partnerships and providing health resources. Through their unique and important role, health librarians of the twenty-first century will help push healthy community agendas. This article highlights strategies for health information professionals to leave the safe confines of the library, venture out, and make a healthful impact in the broader community.

## INTRODUCTION

Consumer health librarians bring expertise on resources and materials relating to all aspects of health and medicine from disease-specific information, chronic medical conditions, therapies and coping strategies to lifestyle adjustments, prevention, emerging health threats, and medical research. Even the preceding description is just a portion of the depth of knowledge health librarians apply in their daily work.

Leading health indicators from the Healthy People 2010 initiative prioritize the most pressing public health issues facing the United States. According to the Office of Disease Prevention and Health Promotion (ODPHP), each indicator is an important health issue in its own right. Together, the indicators illustrate the myriad facets involved in achieving health for individuals, communities, and the nation at large. According to

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LIBRARY TRENDS, Vol. 53, No. 3, Winter 2005 ("Consumer Health Issues, Trends, and Research: Part 2. Applicable Research in the 21st Century," edited by Tammy L. Mays), pp. 453-456

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the ODPHP, public and private agencies must form collaborative partnerships to address these leading health indicator cornerstones:

- The information people have about their health and how they can make changes for improvement
- The healthful behavior choices people make
- Where and how people live
- The quality and accessibility of health care people receive (Healthy People 2010, n.d.)

The goal of Healthy People 2010 is to improve and prolong health while eliminating health disparities. Consumer health librarians are uniquely positioned to help communities tackle the first cornerstone: the kind and quality of health information individuals possess (Healthy People 2010, n.d.). If Americans are to meet the objectives of Healthy People 2010, librarians must be health advocates in their respective communities by partnering with like-minded agencies and organizations. In this way, librarians contribute to the greater good of the nation's health.

#### PARTNERSHIP PERSPECTIVE

Partnerships are essential to healthy communities. The leading health indicators are borne of lifestyle choices, environment, socioeconomic factors, and the availability and affordability of health care services. The World Health Organization defines health as "a state of complete physical, mental and social well-being and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity" (*Preamble*, 1946). Since health is interdependent—combining biological, social, intellectual, environmental, and spiritual needs—no one entity or organization can significantly effect change. In forming or joining partnerships, librarians must understand and seek those relationships based upon sound principles of partnership. Such principles level the playing field for all participants by providing ground rules for both equity and accomplishments.

What principles of partnership foster success? A critical skill is to think outside the library. Typically, because of the interdisciplinary definition of health, organizations from disparate social sectors are represented in community health initiatives. For example, individuals from education, parks and recreation, social service agencies, and public health departments may form a collaborative network. Librarians must understand each agency's unique role and distinct perspectives to help find common ground. Thinking outside the library helps librarians explore their special skills for the good of the group and, ultimately, the community.

Defining the scope of the partnership and the overall mission is essential. Members must have a clear understanding of their relationship to one another and the mutual goals that unite them. Clearly defined

responsibilities and timelines are crucial to the groups' mission. While the timeline must be flexible to accommodate obstacles or new information, there must also be accountability to ensure progress. Each member of the partnership must have a stake in achieving success.

Rules of conduct foster trust. Such rules outline how communication occurs among partners. For example, members will engage in respectful communication without interruption; practice active listening; treat all ideas as valid; and reserve the right to pass on commenting.

Finally, accomplishments must be measurable. What is the group trying to accomplish and how does it determine success? Measurement provides a tool for evaluation and reflection. It contributes to positive and sustainable relationships by providing information to build upon or identifying problems to avoid in future collaborations.

### LIBRARIANS AS ADVOCATES

How might librarians serve as health advocates in community partnerships? An obvious answer is by utilizing their deep mining research skills to

- Identify best practices
- Share relevant news stories and important research results related to community initiatives
- Compile trends data and other statistical information such as census data, demographics, morbidity and mortality data, and health status indicators

Such research or evidence-based partnerships provide a solid foundation for constructing local health initiatives.

Librarians may also contribute considerable, well-developed communication skills to health advocacy efforts through public service announcements, fact sheets, resource and referral lists, public education pieces, and Web site development. Such communication provides a framework to change community norms by integrating health initiatives into the fabric and awareness of community life.

Evaluation and quality filtering skills are vital to select appropriate, meaningful resources. Offering repository and collection development expertise in support of a partnership's health initiatives is another way librarians act as health advocates.

Furthermore, consumers need help to become their own health advocates. Selecting trustworthy health information by evaluating quality and reliability is a librarian's forte. Librarians' intimate knowledge of such criteria enables them to reach consumers by identifying quality health information. Partnerships with other health advocates opens the door to a broader audience.

## CONCLUSION

The recent news about the health of the nation is distressing. Approximately 61 percent of adults are overweight, as are 14 percent of youth. Because of this trend, Type II diabetes, heart disease, certain cancers, stroke, arthritis, and breathing problems are on the increase (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, n.d.). Healthy People 2010 provides a blueprint for addressing the nation's health by identifying fundamental concepts needing attention. Health information is a key component of Healthy People 2010. By applying principles of partnership and bringing their considerable professional skills to community health initiatives, librarians contribute to improving the nation's health.

Now that's advocacy!

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