Preparing public librarians for consumer health information service (by Drs. Lili Luo & Van Ta Park)

Last year we, Dr. Lili Luo (SLIS) and Dr. Van Ta Park (Health Science and Recreation) received a grant from the College of Applied Sciences and Arts to study how to prepare public librarians for consumer health information service. We analyzed reference transactions, surveyed public librarians and interviewed health care professionals. The study is complete, and we would like to use this blog post to share some details about it.

Health literacy is 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”. Health literacy is a foundational and essential notion that connects a variety of key issues in health policy, health services research, health communication, and health care delivery. However, according to the Institute of Medicine, nearly half of all American adults, about 90 million people, have difficulty understanding and using health information, and the nation’s poor health literacy has been characterized as public health’s “silent epidemic”.

An important pathway to health literacy enhancement is efficient and effective access to high-quality and comprehensible health information, and public libraries are uniquely positioned to play a supporting role in this regard. They provide a no-cost, convenient way to assist the public in navigating health information resources, fulfilling their health information needs, and ultimately improving their health literacy. Particularly, the human-intermediated reference services provided by public librarians can help patrons achieve their objectives of health information seeking more successfully.

Yet many public librarians are not comfortable, confident or competent in providing reference service to health information seekers due to concerns such as an inadequate understanding of health literacy, provision of misinformation and possible intrusion on patron privacy. As a result, the level of service delivered by public librarians has shown substantial variability. In order to help public librarians best execute their function of intermediary in reference transactions involving health information needs, professional training is indispensable. Empirical research is needed to identify training needs and establish training requirements. In our study, we sought to answer four research questions:

1. What are the types of health information needs fulfilled by reference services at public libraries?

2. What are the challenges encountered by public librarians when assisting patrons with health information needs?

3. What are public librarians’ desired content and delivery options of training on providing consumer health information service?

4. To elicit thoughts and suggestions from health care professionals about areas of health literacy needs, and ways public librarians can help to improve the public’s health literacy.
To answer the first research question, we discovered that the top three categories of patrons’ health information needs are: questions seeking factual information about the human body, a medical/health condition, a disease, or a medical concept, questions about fitness/diet/nutrition, and questions about the treatment options/healing process of a medical/health condition or a disease, including complementary and alternative therapies. Compared to the literature over the years, it seems that information about specific diseases, drugs, treatment and health promotion or healthy living is consistently popular among public library patrons’ demand.

The second research question sought to determine the challenges faced by public librarians when assisting patrons with health information needs, and its answer, again, echoed findings from previous studies. However, the challenges identified in this study were rank-ordered, providing a prioritized view on which challenges are more commonly recognized and which ones are less. The number one challenge, “Difficulty in interpreting patrons’ questions”, was identified by two-thirds of the respondents, twice the number of respondents that identified the second-rank challenge.

Another challenge worth noting was that many library patrons prefer print materials, and it is difficult to meet their needs as the library lacks up-to-date print collections on medical/health topics. Their print-oriented mindset also makes it difficult for librarians to encourage patrons to migrate from books to online resources. This is likely to explain the reference desk being the predominant venue where librarians encounter health-related questions. Meanwhile, it highlights the importance of educating library patrons about the advantages of online resources (e.g. better currency) in meeting their health information needs. Apparently, the meaningful solution to this challenge is not costly investment in print collections. Instead, active patron outreach needs to be conducted to increase their awareness of the value of online resources and help them understand that their questions can be more effectively and efficiently answered using online resources. Patrons’ mindset shift is critical in successfully providing health information service to them.

The third research question aimed at discovering the desired content and delivery options of consumer health information service training, and we learned that the topics librarians wished to see covered in training were aligned with the challenges they faced. For example, the top two training topics, knowledge/navigation of up-to-date health information resources, and health reference interview, corresponded with the top two challenges, difficulty in interpreting patrons’ questions and lack of knowledge about available medical/health information sources.

As for the way training should be delivered, the most popular option was self-paced online tutorials. The dominant preference toward self-paced online tutorials may have two contributing factors: 1) since Internet and computer access has become ubiquitous, online learning is playing a more important role in librarians’ professional development; 2) public librarians usually have a busy work schedule, and flexibility of the training format affords them better control of the learning process.

To address the last research question, we interviewed ten health care providers. Sample reference transactions, electronic inquiries made by library users (“patrons”) to public librarians and the response from the librarians, were shown to participants to determine whether they think the health inquiries were adequately answered, and if not, what could have been done to make the transaction more successful. We found that, overall, participants had favorable perspectives about and experiences with public libraries, and thought that the public librarians’ role includes addressing their community’s health literacy needs. Participants’ perspectives regarding the websites that the public librarians included in the reference transactions varied. Also, some participants stressed the need for public librarians to establish boundaries in their responses to the patrons (i.e. refrain from providing medical advice or personal comments). However, other participants felt that some of the librarians’ responses were too brief and that
the librarians should offer specific/expanded comments. Participants recommended reputable websites and training for public librarians to improve their own and the community’s health literacy.

Overall, our study constitutes the basis to establish training requirements and develop training programs to meet the needs of public librarians. Their mastery of the necessary skills, knowledge and competencies via training is crucial to the effective and efficient delivery of consumer health information service in public libraries. Practitioners and educators gain from the study enhanced knowledge of the various types of health information needs encountered by public librarians, a clear view of the challenges they face when providing consumer health information service, and most importantly, a thorough and solid understanding of their training needs. Training is indispensable to public librarians’ success in helping patrons fulfill their health information needs, and our study helps address two key issues in providing training to librarians – what topics to cover and how to deliver it. Understanding librarians’ desired training format and their desired training topics, practitioners and educators will be able to make informed decisions in designing training and education programs for them.

Future research may build upon this study and focus on creating the specific content of training and education for public librarians. Now that the desired training topics have been identified, the next step is to investigate what content to cover, what to leave out, what to emphasize, and what to minimize under each area, as well as how to convey the content via librarians’ favorite training format, self-paced online tutorial.