



Special issue: Health information transforming lives

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The Health and Biosciences Libraries Section (HBS) of the International Federation of Library and Information Associations (IFLA) is the IFLA ‘voice’ on health and biosciences information and libraries. The HBS, therefore, acts as a forum for special libraries concerned with all aspects of information management and services in relation to the medical, health and other biological sciences. The HBS aims include: the implementation of and support for better management and provision of health care information to health practitioners, researchers, academics and consumers; facilitating the development and application of new technologies relevant to the health and biosciences libraries; supporting the next generation of health information professionals; strengthening and/or initiating the cooperation between HBS and related libraries, organisations, institutions and associations at national, regional and international levels. The HBS, therefore, focuses on Sustainable Development Goal number 3. As part of its activities, HBS has an active research programme and has just concluded a study on the educational needs for health librarianship in the East, Central and Southern Africa region. The HBS recently sponsored a Special Interest Group on Evidence for Global and Disaster Health, which in addition to SDG 3, addresses SDG 6 and 11.

In view of the above, the HBS has prepared this special issue of the *IFLA Journal* on the theme of ‘Health information transforming lives’. The issue highlights the transforming effect of health information in society. For example, library outreach, in all its forms, requires that the librarians leave their own traditional space, enter someone else’s space, learn about the people occupying that space and create a connection between the two. For health librarians wishing to connect with traditionally underserved and hard-to-reach populations, this requires not only learning about and appreciating the cultural differences that may distinguish those populations from

other sections of society, but also about the many health disparities that are likely to exist. For those who may be members of more than one traditionally underserved community, this may also involve understanding and navigating multiple layers of discrimination and their effect on the person’s health, on their sources of information, health information needs as well as their information behaviour.

Long viewed as safe places and spaces, libraries serve as hubs of information services for students, researchers, academics, practitioners and the entire society including underprivileged communities. In both the developed and developing countries, new ideas and services keep emerging, some simultaneously and others adapted and contextualised as being more appropriate for a developing country setting. This Special Issue includes specific examples of innovative projects that have been implemented by health information professionals reaching out to the hard-to-reach areas, giving evidence of what was learnt and demonstrating that a specified group of people was reached and supported. The contribution of public librarians to health information provision is also highlighted in two papers. The successful projects reported in this issue can be replicated in other areas in line with IFLA’s Global Vision of ‘powering literate, informed and participative societies’.

Furthermore, this Special Issue has explored and demonstrated alternative ways of measuring impact beyond traditional scholarly metrics. Conventional bibliometric analysis of output can indeed be complemented by metrics that assess the dissemination and impact of medical/health research through social media, usage of biomedical devices, disease

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epidemiology, and/or other methods that engage the public to improve health. Hence, new roles undertaken by health information professionals in supporting research and the practice of health care have been highlighted. It is, therefore, important to continue building the capacity of librarians to increase their knowledge and skills to be able to perform the new and multiple roles.

In addition, three authors have grounded their papers theoretically using models or theories that are relevant to the theme of transforming lives and society in general. Such theoretical underpinning is important in advancing our understanding and shaping future efforts in research and practice.

The Special Issue has seven papers that embrace a broad geographic coverage. The papers have reiterated the value of information and its transformative effect to health care. This confirms what several authors had reported (Goel, 2015; Mbondji, 2014; Musoke, 2016; Palsdottir, 2010; Wyber, 2019). We congratulate the successful paper authors for bringing us update on the various ways health information has transformed lives.

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