

Commentary

How a Consumer Health Library Can Help Streamline Your Practice

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More consumers of health care are increasingly demanding satisfactory information about their medical problems. Although these demands are essential in helping patients make informed choices, they may overburden physicians. Consumer health libraries—medical libraries designed and staffed for the general public and patients—are part of the answer to this dilemma. They can amplify the essential medical information that cannot be given by a physician because of time burdens. They do not dispense medical advice or provide consultation. They do provide accurate and timely information that permits patients to become more knowledgeable about their medical problems.

Consumer health libraries resemble the medical libraries that physicians have known since they were medical students, but with one crucial difference. They are planned and staffed not primarily for physicians, but for patients and the general public. Despite this, they can also assist physicians in various important ways:

- They provide accurate and timely information about medical problems and can guide patrons in doing necessary research.
- They can furnish specific information to patients at a physician's request.
- When patients do not fully comprehend what their physician has told them, particularly if they have a complicated medical problem or an illness that seems to be life-threatening, the library gives them the opportunity to become better informed in a less threatening environment and to ask more pertinent questions of their physician.
- The information given to patients may limit a physician's tort liability. Many malpractice suits can arise when the patient and the family do not fully comprehend a recommended course of treatment, its limitations, and its risks. The library staff guides the patient and family to appropriate reading to help overcome this problem. The information can be copied and taken home for rereading.

Some critics of consumer health libraries feel that they dispense information that is not always objective.

No studies could be found that address this question, so the issue cannot be resolved at this time.

The heart of a typical consumer health library is its voluminous clipping file containing accurate and up-to-date information on almost any conceivable medical subject. Because this material is regularly culled from medical journals, newsletters, magazines, and newspapers, it is always current. The culling is usually done by volunteers, which makes it cost-effective. Physicians may also find the clipping file useful and less expensive than a MEDLINE search.

A consumer health library's shelves contain stacks of books and journals, including an assortment of standard medical texts and periodicals. The library also has a collection of books and newsletters written specifically for the public to make medical information more understandable.

Many libraries now have educational video sections with standard video cassettes and interactive videos. An even newer service is a user-friendly interactive computer program, such as the Health Reference Center from Infotrac. A patron can enter the name of a medical condition on the keyboard. Appropriate references then appear on the monitor with directions as to how more information can be obtained. This allows unlimited searches without the time and expense of an on-line computer service.

Consumer health libraries have computers that can be used for a search of MEDLINE, PDQ, or other MEDLARS databases. A librarian will usually have to conduct these searches. Recently developed gateway programs are making these data bases more accessible to the general public.

Some libraries offer a free lecture series. Physicians are invited to give brief talks and to answer questions about a topic pertaining to their specialty. In addition to providing useful information, this may also help physicians receive new patients from the audience.

Consumer health libraries should be staffed by medical librarians, perhaps with assistance from nurses and other volunteers. Persons with this training are relatively scarce, however, and alternative solutions are often

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necessary. Libraries usually are open without charge to the public residing in the area. Memberships for others may be offered at a cost of \$10 for senior citizens and as much as \$250 for businesses. Members obtain free mailings and the use of books and videos. They also receive discounts for on-line computer searches.

The consumer health library movement has caught on fairly slowly and spottily in the past decade. There are now at least 25 libraries nationwide, scattered over about 12 states. In addition, an unknown number of hospitals are developing their own libraries, often dealing

with only one subject, such as cancer or aging. There is no satisfactory nationwide list of consumer health libraries. The list included here, compiled from several sources, is as complete and as accurate as possible. There are almost certainly many more. Those associated with public library systems are difficult to identify.

Physicians who appropriately refer their patients to such a library or attempt in concert with hospitals and other community health agencies to organize one will find that their efforts will reap notable savings in energy, exposure to liability, and, most important of all, time.

ARIZONA

W.O. Boswell Memorial Hospital
First Edition
13101 N 103rd Ave
Sun City, AZ 85351
(602) 974-7848

CALIFORNIA

Alta Bates-Herrick Hospital
Vintage Health Library
2001 Dwight Way
Berkeley, CA 94704
(510) 540-4475

California Pacific Medical Center
Planetree Resource Center
2040 Webster St
San Francisco, CA 94115
(415) 923-3680

Gould Medical Center
Gateway Health Library
500 Coffee Rd, Suite D
Modesto, CA 95335
(800) 52-GOULD

Kaiser Permanente Medical Center
Health Education Center
280 W MacArthur Blvd
Oakland, CA 94611
(510) 596-6150

Kaiser Permanente
Learning Center
13652 Cantara St
Panorama City, CA 91402
(818) 375-3018

Los Gatos Medical Resource Facility
815 Pollard Rd
Los Gatos, CA 95030
(408) 866-4044

Mission Hospital Regional Medical Center
Consumer Health Information Center
27700 Medical Center Rd
Mission Viejo, CA 92691
(714) 582-2919

San Jose Medical Center
Planetree Resource Center
98 N 17th St
San Jose, CA 95112
(408) 977-4549

Stanford University Hospital
The Health Library
248 Stanford Shopping Center
Palo Alto, CA 94304
(415) 725-8400

Sutter Resource
PO Box 160727
Sacramento, CA 95816
(916) 733-3880

Valley Care Medical Center
Valley Care Health Library
5575 W La Positas Blvd, Suite 120
Pleasanton, CA 94588
(510) 734-3315

Veterans Affairs Medical Center
Patient Education Resource Center
4150 Clement St
San Francisco, CA 94121
(415) 221-4810, x3477

FLORIDA

James A. Haley VA Medical Center
Patient's Library
13000 Bruce B. Downs Blvd
Tampa, FL 33512
(813) 972-2000, x7531

ILLINOIS

MacNeal Hospital
Consumer Health Information Service
3249 Oak Park Ave
Berwyn, IL 60402
(708) 795-3089

MICHIGAN

Battle Creek HealthSystem
HealthNetwork
80 N 20th St
Battle Creek, MI 49015
(616) 964-5616

Bronson Methodist Hospital
HealthAnswers
252 E Lovell
Kalamazoo, MI 49007
(616) 341-6318

Catherine McAuley Health System
McAuley Health Information Library
PO Box 995
Ann Arbor, MI 48106
(313) 712-5177

MISSOURI

Consumer Health Information Research
Institute
3521 Broadway
Kansas City, MO 64111
(816) 753-8850

NEW HAMPSHIRE

Hitchcock Clinic Pregnancy Resource Center
2 Maynard St
Hanover, NH 03576
(603) 646-7860

OREGON

Good Samaritan Medical Center
Family Resource Center
1015 NW 22nd Ave
Portland OR 97201-5198
(503) 229-7348

TEXAS

Wadley Regional Medical Center
Wadley LifeSource
57 Central Mall
Texarkana, TX 75501
(214) 793-5433

WASHINGTON, DC

Providence Hospital
Center for Life Aging Resource
1170 Varnum St
Washington, DC 20017
(202) 269-7075

WASHINGTON (STATE)

King County Library System
Bellevue Regional Library
(No formal health library, but a great deal of consumer health material is available.)
1111 110th Ave NW
Seattle, WA 98004
(206) 450-1760