

# Service to the Lay Public

## I. Who is the "Lay Public"?\*

BY IRMA A. BEEHLER, *Librarian*

*Tulsa County Medical Society  
Tulsa, Oklahoma*

I should like to say at the beginning that I dislike the term "lay public," for it gives me the unwanted feeling of a holier-than-thou attitude. It seems to me to smack so much of separation of the sheep from the goats. I avoid using it if I can think of another. But this is one of those moments when I cannot think of a better one.

I believe that in the strictest interpretation of this question by a Society library, the answer would be that the lay public is that group of people who are not physicians nor supporting members of a medical society. A broader interpretation, concurred in by practically all Society librarians, defines the lay public as that group which has no professional affiliation with medicine.

In order to arrive at an answer that would be the average one for Society libraries, I sent out an appeal for help to many of those libraries. The responses have been very interesting as they have shown both extremes of viewpoint, but with an overwhelming majority agreeing on the same basic idea. Some of the factors I mention will, no doubt, be covered by other speakers, but since the subjects are so closely allied, I do not see how that can be avoided. It is difficult to give an answer without citing a few examples of policies.

One reply stated simply that the library was not open to the public and it continued with a definition of the term which coincided with that of all the others. I might say here that it does not seem to me that we can brush aside the public entirely. With practically every magazine which comes off the presses today containing an article or two on health matters or recent advances in medicine, the layman is becoming more and more aware of what is going on in these fields and is developing a growing interest in it. He no longer is satisfied with being given a pretty pink pill for whatever ails him; he wants to know the whys and wherefores. He wants an intelligent answer and there should be some place for him to go to get an intelligent answer. Naturally, he goes to a medical library.

Another reply expressed the opposite viewpoint, for it does not consider anyone a layman in the sense that he is not allowed to use its facilities. This library encourages the public to come there for information; this brings up

\* Read at the 53d Annual Meeting, Medical Library Association, Washington, D. C., June 17, 1954.

the problem of a sufficient staff to answer questions asked by readers unfamiliar with medical terminology.

A middle group, which is the largest by far, considers the lay public as that group of persons who have no professional affiliation with medicine. These libraries are open without restrictions to internes, nurses, pharmacists, technicians, etc., as well as to the legal profession, students, writers, and the public upon presentation of a guest card signed by a member of its Society.

It is in this middle category that the Library of the Tulsa County Medical Society belongs. We have few rules, some of which are broken at the discretion of the librarian. Until about three years ago we loaned books to anyone who presented a guest card, but due to an unpleasant experience this privilege was taken away.

Many replies indicate that the legal profession has easy access to the libraries. The following incident at the Tulsa County Medical Society Library whittled down our broadminded attitude considerably. Many articles have appeared recently telling of a charge of technical assault brought against an anesthesiologist by a patient who had had a spinal anesthetic and claimed to have been paralyzed as a result. The jury awarded the patient damages of \$60,000. The case was appealed through the courts and each court upheld the verdict. By the time the last appeal was turned down, the amount of the court costs had risen to \$13,000, making the total damages charged against the doctor \$73,000.

The doctor is one of the loyal supporters of the Tulsa Library and it was to the Library that the plaintiff's attorney came to study for his case. At that time we allowed members of the legal profession to check out books if they had the customary guest card. The attorney borrowed several volumes. The books became overdue and upon my first insistence that they be brought back, I was subpoenaed to appear in court with the books when the case was called. The books were not returned to the Library until 5 o'clock the evening before I was to take them to the courthouse. At the trial it was brought out that the books used for reference were from the Library of the Tulsa County Medical Society, and that a couple of them were gifts of the defendant, which amused the jury and the spectators. It should not be surprising that for some time we looked upon the legal profession with a slightly jaundiced eye. We still allow any attorney with a guest card to use the material in the Library, but no books will be loaned.

In evaluating the replies received from the many Society librarians who answered my call for help, I conclude that the answer to the question "Who is the Lay Public?" seems to be that it is that group of persons who have no affiliation whatever with the medical profession.