

Library Service to Dental Practitioners

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ABSTRACT

Dental school libraries offer resources of value to dental practitioners, but do not always consider practitioners to be primary clientele. A survey was conducted among the sixty U.S. dental school libraries to examine policies and attitudes toward service to practitioners. Although library use by dentists is estimated to be low, most libraries are willing to serve them as long as it does not reduce the libraries' ability to assist students and faculty. Of the respondents, 57% replied that they do not use promotional methods to inform dentists of available services. Greater involvement in marketing activities may benefit both libraries and dentists.

DENTAL SCHOOL LIBRARIES house information of value to practicing dentists as well as to faculty and students. Service to practitioners, however, has not been a major responsibility of dental school libraries. Dentists have typically not been actively involved in research, and they tend to use the American Dental Association (ADA) library when seeking information in dentistry [1].

Health care professionals are beginning to realize that merging the responsibilities of the dental practitioner and the researcher is required for effective delivery of oral health care [2]. Carlos recommended that dentists become more active in the dissemination of knowledge resulting from research and become better able to transmit research findings from the scientist to the patient [3]. Greater emphasis on research should increase use of library resources by dental practitioners.

Whether the dentist engages in research or periodically reviews the literature for articles on the latest developments in clinical dentistry, the dental school library will be an important source of information in dentistry, medicine, and related sciences. Dentists living near the dental school can visit the library to browse through the collection, scan current periodicals, or use the journal indexes. Others can request books from the dental library through the interlibrary loan service of the local public library. Because school libraries are often open

evenings and weekends, the practitioner can call or visit the library after office hours. On-line bibliographic retrieval is available at most dental school libraries, but is not provided by the ADA library. In addition, dental libraries either are part of a medical library collection or are located within a medical center. Thus, dentists eligible to use the dental collection have access to medical books and journals. Dentists may also become eligible to use dental school libraries by attending continuing education programs at the schools. Most libraries are open to these dentists during or after the program; dentists are welcome to use the library resources and, in many cases, may borrow books.

The study to be described investigated four factors involved in library service to practitioners:

1. What are library policies for servicing dental practitioners?
2. What are the attitudes of the libraries toward service to practitioners?
3. To what extent and by what methods do libraries advertise their services to dentists?
4. How often do dentists use dental school libraries?

METHODS

A questionnaire was designed to examine dental school library service to dental practitioners. The first section listed six major library services (lending books, interlibrary loan, photocopying, on-line bibliographic retrieval, manual literature searching, and reference), and respondents were asked to indicate which they provided to four categories of practitioners: all dentists, in-state dentists, alumni of the dental school, and dental auxiliary personnel. In addition, respondents were asked to indicate if they charge for these services and what type of request they will accept: mail, telephone, or in person.

Further questions asked about library use by practicing dentists, library participation in continuing education programs, and methods used to

LIBRARIES AND DENTAL PRACTITIONERS

promote library service among oral health professionals. The respondents were then asked if they believed it important to provide library service to dental practitioners. The final items on the questionnaire were source of library funding (private or public), identification of the respondent and library, and additional comments.

The questionnaire was mailed to the sixty dental school libraries in the United States. Six weeks later, a second mailing was sent to libraries that had not responded.

RESULTS

Dental school libraries returned fifty-three questionnaires (88%) after the second mailing. Although two respondents did not answer all questions, all respondents completed the section on available services. Tallies of the replies to the first section revealed wide variety among library policies on service to unaffiliated dentists. For example, eleven libraries will lend books to all dentists, but eight will not lend to practitioners. Fifteen libraries restrict circulation to alumni and three will lend only to local dentists. Some respondents indicated that they use various mechanisms to improve service to practitioners, including statewide referral systems, free library cards for state residents, annual membership fees, and deposit accounts maintained for its members by the state dental association.

Most libraries charge for interlibrary loans, on-line bibliographic retrieval, and photocopying service, but do not charge for lending books, reference service, or manual literature searches. On-line bibliographic service, particularly MEDLINE, is provided by 85% of the libraries to some category of practitioner. Eighty-one percent of the libraries charge for on-line retrieval service, and about half of these charge a supplemental fee to practitioners. Twenty-three libraries (43%) do not perform manual literature searches for practitioners. Thirty-nine (73%) reported that they provide reference service to all dentists; a few libraries restrict this service to alumni, in-state dentists, or library members.

Forty-two libraries could estimate the number of requests received each month from dental practitioners. The distribution of these estimates is shown in Table 1. Almost 75% of the libraries receive ten requests or fewer each month.

Participation in continuing education programs places the librarian in contact with large groups of dental practitioners and gives the librarian an opportunity to tell them about the library resources

TABLE 1
ESTIMATED USE OF DENTAL LIBRARIES
BY DENTAL PRACTITIONERS

No. of Requests per Month	No. of Libraries (%)
0-10	31 (73.8)
11-20	7 (16.6)
21-30	2 (4.8)
31-40	0
41-50	2 (4.8)
Total	42 (100)

available, but responses showed that few librarians take advantage of this opportunity to promote the library. Seven libraries (14%) indicated that they participate to some extent; two others replied that occasionally they prepare bibliographies for instructors of continuing education classes, but do not otherwise take part in the program. Forty-four libraries (83%) answered that they do not participate in continuing education courses conducted at the dental school.

Thirty-nine libraries allow dentists to use the library while attending continuing education seminars at the school. Six additional libraries specified that practitioners may use materials in-house only. The last six libraries answered that they do not make services available to dentists during continuing education programs.

Methods used to promote library services to dental practitioners fall into the categories listed in Table 2. Other means of advertising listed by respondents were word of mouth, society meetings, in-house guides, library newsletters, dental association handbook, and AHEC/LRC newsletter. Twenty-two libraries (43%) use at least one method

TABLE 2
METHODS USED TO PROMOTE LIBRARY SERVICE TO
DENTAL PRACTITIONERS

Method	No. of Libraries (%)
Articles in local or state association journals	7 (9.3)
Alumni bulletin	10 (13.3)
Continuing education programs	6 (8.0)
Information given to graduating students	12 (16.0)
Other	12 (16.0)
None	28 (37.3)
Total	75 (100)

of promotion to inform practicing dentists about library services. Twenty-nine libraries (57%) indicated that they do not advertise at all.

Thirty-six libraries indicated that they believe it important to offer library service to dental practitioners. Twelve other libraries acknowledged the importance, but indicated that they cannot provide adequate service due to limited resources. Three replied that only students and faculty are served by the dental library.

DISCUSSION

The sixty dental schools in the United States are located in thirty-three states. Dentists residing in the seventeen states without dental schools must depend on out-of-state dental libraries for dental information. Because 89% of the libraries that responded to the survey indicated that alumni may use at least one of their services and six librarians replied that their services are available to all dentists, most dentists have access to dental information.

Ninety-four percent of the libraries acknowledged their responsibility to provide service to practitioners, yet fewer than half advertise the availability of their resources to dentists outside the school. Library administrators may hesitate to encourage dentists to use the library for fear that this would lower the quality of service available to their primary clientele, the students and faculty of the school. Limited resources of budget, space, staff, and collection have forced many libraries to restrict the services available to practitioners.

Organizational structure may also affect the library's policy toward service for practitioners. Because autonomous or branch dental school libraries are devoted to the subject of dentistry, it was thought that they would be apt to assume responsibility for filling the information needs of all dental professionals. Three of the seventeen separate dental libraries (18%) indicated reservations about their ability to spare resources or about their responsibility to assist practitioners. Nine of the thirty-four centralized libraries that house medical, dental, allied health, and nursing collections in one facility (26%) also replied in this manner. In addition, 53% of the separate dental libraries and 41% of the centralized libraries report that they engage

in some promotional activities. Thus, these replies suggest that separate dental school libraries are somewhat more aware of and more responsive to the information needs of dental practitioners.

Marketing of library service is currently receiving attention in the information-sciences literature. The benefits that result from attitudes, planning, and techniques involved in the marketing process can be realized by dental school libraries [4, 5]. Although the survey did not uncover a correlation between promotional activities and the number of dentists estimated to use the library each month, advertising (one aspect of marketing) should effectively reach those dentists who need information related to dentistry. Through continuing education programs and various types of publications that reach the dental community outside the school, librarians can inform dentists about their services, hours, and charges. Librarians who feel it important to serve dental practitioners have established marketing programs to ensure that dentists know what resources are available and how to gain access to them.

CONCLUSION

The policies of dental school libraries regarding service to dental practitioners vary greatly. Use by practitioners is estimated to be fairly low. Most dental school libraries acknowledge the importance of offering service to dentists; however, few libraries advertise their services to this group of potential users and thus fail to tell dentists what services are available and how they can be used.

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