Health Information for Consumers in Developing Nations: A Medical Librarian’s Perspective

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ABSTRACT

Health information, both professional as well as consumer oriented, is an important component of the health care service. Professionals constantly need information for academics, research, preventive care, treatment and also to stay updated and to create and update health policies. Consumers need health information to stay healthy and to manage diseases and conditions. Generic search engines like Google and Yahoo answers are utilized extensively for getting health information (Akerkar & Bichile, 2004). However while utilizing these engines information seekers most often have to sift through volumes of data that often include questionable sources of information. Health professionals face lacunae in receiving training about information resources and databases, and the structured approach to searching these. Both consumers and health professionals spend far too much time searching for information, time that could be utilized much better in the actual health care delivery process. This article describes a medical librarian’s journey from being a health information consumer to a health information provider both to health professionals and consumers.

Keywords: Cochrane, Consumer Awareness, Information Therapy, Medical Librarian, Professional Education, PubMed, Resources

INTRODUCTION

All of us are healthcare consumers at one or more times in our lives. I have been no exception. As a child I wondered why I had to have horrible tasting “mixtures” or worse, painful injections to get rid of any sickness. As I grew up the questions evolved into more mature ones. As an undergraduate student of science I had my share of wonder as to how the human body worked in various health and disease conditions. I sought answers from my course work and accepted without questioning, all that I learned in my textbooks. Having studied these I thought “I knew it all”.

I always thought that people imbibed maximum knowledge only during their formal education. I had never given a thought to how they would learn more later in life. I thought their learning came with a combination of experience, interaction with peers and by ‘some’ methods that they would figure out by themselves. Thankfully I was humble enough...
to also know that I always would need to learn more, but this I assumed would be from what I would study if I did a post graduate education.

It was much later when I studied library sciences, worked in libraries, especially medical libraries I realized that staying updated in one’s professional discipline on a regular basis was a major responsibility. Not only was it a responsibility but also that there was a component of scientific approach for doing so. This, I felt was even more strong in the medical profession because it dealt with human lives. I soon realized that librarians had a major role in this area because they were a very essential component of the bit regarding structured approach to keep oneself updated. It sank into me that we had to ensure that health professionals learned these skills and took our professional help for their own development and equally importantly for the consumers and patients they took care of.

A Healthcare Consumer

With time I learned that it was certainly not enough for only health professionals to keep up-to-date and offer evidence-based health options to their patients and community, but it was equally important for consumers to be well informed and take their share of responsibility for their health care decisions. There are times that it is difficult for consumers to take decisions and this maybe for a variety of reasons. But it is important for them to then own the responsibility of leaving the decision to their doctor or their relatives / near ones. For health consumers to be responsible, they need to have access to reliable information, gain knowledge about understanding the basics of health research (from a patient’s perspective) and also understand that while there may be major advances in the health care domain happening on a continuous basis, there are limitations too and so adopt a balanced approach to managing their health situations. Consumers again have no one to train them to go to authentic resources and there are very few Indian health resources on the web that are aimed to educate consumers in a structured fashion.

After my childhood experiences, like many others, I have experienced larger health concerns at various stages of my life. As a young adult, I had problems conceiving. I had had a fall, resulting in a hairline crack in my fibula. I used to suffer from severe allergic rhinitis. When family members had health problems ranging from arthritis to spinal injuries, I had a million questions as a care giver. Like everyone, I went to the doctor, followed his/her instructions but always had more questions in my head, some that I could ask, some that I felt I could not, some that I’d forget to ask. “How much could I bother a doctor with ….” was always a big question in my mind.

The seed for the need for good consumer information was sown deep inside me.

A Medical and Consumer Health Librarian

Several years later I studied for a degree in Library & Information Sciences and a little later became a medical librarian and later also did a stint as a consumer health librarian. It was at this time that we in India first had public access to the Internet. As a consumer health librarian I was delighted to see several excellent information resources on every topic of health and disease. And it was a wonderful experience to be able to help young women who were pregnant with simple to read books, pamphlets and videos about pregnancy and what to expect during labor.

As a librarian who came into the field when computers and then the Internet became an integral part of professional activities, I developed expertise in searching large databases of information and teaching health professionals of our hospital, how to search for information ranging from broad topics to specific narrow questions.

As my skills developed and grew, I felt that I needed to reach out to a larger audience than those in my own library and went on to work as a consultant and then later set up a not-for-profit Trust to work in these areas.
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