The Value of Health Libraries and Librarians to the Irish Health System

Abstract

Librarians working in the Irish health sector are under threat. This is a relatively young profession in comparison with other professions commonly performing the same role, such as doctors, nurses, and managers, and it is being targeted by the Health Service Executive (HSE). A number of factors influence the decision to conduct research. Firstly, the last time any formal research was done in this sector was in 1990, with the publication of the MacDougall Report. This was instrumental in the creation of jobs for librarians in the then health boards and voluntary hospitals.

Introduction

In 2010 the HSLG formed a Health Research Group to investigate producing research into Irish health librarians and libraries as part of its Strategic Plan 2009-2013. The Group was made up of librarians from the Health Service Executive (HSE) with the support of the Research Board while also representing all librarians working in the Irish health sector. A number of factors influenced the decision to conduct research. Firstly, the last time any formal research was done in this sector was in 1990, with the publication of the MacDougall Report. This was instrumental in the creation of jobs for librarians in the then health boards and voluntary hospitals.

Methods

The HSLG Health Research Group convened in 2010. As the group is voluntary it was necessary to outsource the research. A tender was published and in 2010 the contract was awarded to the Department of Information Science at Loughborough University. The team at Loughborough adopted a mixed methods approach. Qualitative methods included a focus group and interviews with key stakeholders in the Irish health sector namely the HSE, Department of Health and Children, RCoS, INMO and users nurses, doctors, and librarians. Quantitative methods included a survey of health library staff in Ireland. It is worth mentioning that they were responsible for organizing the HSLG’s 2010 conference on the impact of librarians in the library association of Ireland.

Results

The results of the research were the publication of the SHELLI Report which was officially launched by the CEO of the Royal College of Physicians in Ireland, in January 2012. The findings confirm that the profession is under threat and that a skills gap will result if the economic and political climate does not change (i.e. the moratorium). The sector is small with at least 75 library units in existence, of which 49 deliver services from hospitals. On a positive note, there is an appreciation by stakeholders doctors, nurses, managers of the value of librarians to their work. The library service in the health system in Ireland was also found to be professionally run. However, there is a lack of a collective body of evidence to demonstrate the value and impact of the work of librarians. Other countries have published evidence demonstrating the vital role of librarians in the delivery of clinical services. A key recommendation is to build this body of evidence.

Discussion

There is a perception amongst librarians that doctors, nurses and other health professionals are not clear on the value or role of librarians in healthcare. This is something that our profession must tackle. It is recommended that librarians market their expertise in EBM, information literacy, evidence to support corporate governance and specialist information services to clinicians and other health professionals. A possible future role is that of a clinical librarian. This involves a librarian working in clinical teams, attending clinical meetings, providing evidence based information to support patient care and in some cases, being included on ward rounds. Another role is that of Corporate Librarian – informing evidence based managerial decision-making and clinical governance. In summarizing their recommendations the research team identified three strategic areas: build a body of evidence, promote the value of librarians and develop staff and services.

The recent annual conference of the HSLG showcased initiatives that librarians in Ireland are spearheading (Table 1). They include the beginnings of a clinical librarian model. The HSLG in various locations have developed a clinical librarian role enabling them to be as an integral part of the multidisciplinary team. In addition, the HSLG set up a SHeLLI working group made up of librarians working across the health sector. The group has reviewed and prioritised recommendations and is in the process of drawing up action plans around their implementation. The implementation process is more important now than ever particularly as the health system is repositioning itself to deliver services within existing and reduced resources.

The National Cancer Control Programme is supported by HSE librarians with clinical queries. Beaumont and Connolly Hospitals piloted the involvement of librarians in ward rounds, but although benefits were cited by clinicians, the practice was deemed unsustainable in the current climate. Flynn found that attitudes of doctors to the inclusion of a clinical informationist on a clinical team were mainly positive including: improving clinicians access to information, patient care, teaching and utilisation of evidence-based medicine and for continuing professional development. A librarian working in the Midwifery Department at Trinity College Dublin documented the impact of information literacy courses he runs in improving the search skills of undergraduate midwifery students. The librarian at the Milford Care Centre reported on the positive impact of a bibliotherapy service she set up on the ability of the bereaved to cope with their loss. These examples are a snapshot of the value librarians bring to the healthcare system.

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We are living in the information age. Doctors and other health professionals are time poor, while the volume and depth of clinical information available is rich. The modern patient is more likely to be informed and self-sufficient than patients of a previous generation. Patients are turning to the internet for help and information but how effective are their searching skills? Clinicians have a role to play in improving the quality of information available on the internet about health; however librarians once employed, could play a role in the organisation of this information and in the education of consumers about finding, evaluating and using this information. The SHeLLI report advocates a role for librarians in the provision of quality health information to the public.

In this era of lean thinking, can we afford to have a health system diminished of its librarians?

The message to doctors and health professionals is, in the words of author Neil Gaiman, "Google can bring you back 100,000 answers, a librarian can bring you back the right one." With the support of health professionals, librarians could be integrated into clinical teams and become an integral part of the health system. The embedded librarian could advance evidence based practice and culture in the Irish health system of today and tomorrow.

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References