

Dangerous Illusions! Needs and Requirements for a Health Science Librarian in 2003 and beyond.

As Health Science Librarians, we've noticed a great change in the professional literature over the last few years, when it comes to discussing our area of the profession. In this brief article, I'd like to highlight some of the challenges that we face in the future. Although the emphasis and examples are drawn from the Health Science sector of the profession, it may be that there are parallels, which can be reflected in other sectors as well.

The most significant challenge is to realise that the focus is not on the library, or the physical space that the library occupies. Rather, it is on the Librarian, and the skills that a Librarian requires. Indeed, this is to put it mildly. It's not just about what skills we require. It's about the skills we require if Librarianship as a profession is to survive, and not be subsumed into a plethora of new information roles that are beginning to emerge. For example, have a look at some of these;

Information Scientist - Information Researcher - Knowledge Manager -

Librarian and Research Officer - Medical Knowledge Architect -

Information Specialist - Medical Information Researcher -

Health Informatics Officer - Information Officer - Informationist.

There are no illusions here - these are job titles that have all been advertised or claimed within the last 18 months both here and in the UK. If that's not enough, just how important is a professional qualification any more. Only in the last few days, a despairing member of staff in a library I used to work for in London, called me to tell me, that my post is now held by a solicitor who is "interested" in information management. The new post holder concentrates on information management, and leaves the other two members of staff to look after the library - she no longer has the time!

So when as Health Science Librarians we hear the traditional doctrine being reaffirmed of

- Providing a service
- Supporting our users
- Acting as intermediaries

It's tempting to start throwing bottles and heavy objects out of windows. It's not that there is anything wrong with these ideals, or that they are not noble ones. It's simply that they are no longer adequate, and by casting ourselves in a purely supporting role, as may be evident from the above, we are in great danger of doing ourselves a grave disservice.

So, how do we change this?

*"Do not marvel that I said to you, "You must be born anew."
John 3:7*

A number of us in the sector have been discussing these issues over the last few months, and reflecting on our own roles, and as we do so, it's becoming clearer and clearer, that as Librarians, we need to start again - much of what we are taught in our degrees or post graduate courses is of little or no use to us in the roles that we are increasingly being called to in the profession. The only constant, as in so many other professions is change, and this, plus the acquisition of new skills, is the only way to continually validate our profession, and the Health Sciences sector.

So, if we are to be born anew, where do we start, what do we need, and what should we expect?

First on my list, is the need for us to be taught philosophic logic, and the art of logical thinking. I was not taught this as a Librarian, but as part of another degree. I would not say either that I was the best exponent of it, but it has possibly been the most useful thing I have ever learnt. As Health Science Librarians, we urgently, if not desperately, need the ability to be not just able to present a reasoned argument, but perhaps more importantly, to get behind the logic and reasoning of other peoples arguments. This is not always as easy as it seems. But in the realm of medical research, the art of critical appraisal, a skill which we are increasingly being called upon to perform, demands the application of a well trained mind, able to use deductive logic, and critically assess information from a variety of different angles.

Second is the need, to accept that we will have to cultivate a degree of subject specialisation. To some extent, within academic library circles, this has already happened, in the form of subject librarians. However, in medical libraries, it simply is not possible to be all things to all people, which is the situation that faces many of us. We need to have an in-depth knowledge of the areas in which we work, and I mean in-depth. It's not enough to know that ECT is short for Electro Convulsive Therapy and to have some idea of where information is available. We need to be steeped in the literature, and to be able to understand, talk, and perhaps even study with health care professionals on a basis of equality. We need to be considered critical members of the health care team

This means, of course, that a three-year mixed degree, or a one-year postgraduate cram course is nowhere near enough. Many health care professionals can study for up to nine years, interspersed with practice, and the absolute requirement to engage in continuing professional development. If we aspire to collaboration with health care professionals, then this is what we have to consider, and the sooner the colleges and universities that offer library and information courses realise this, the healthier our sector in the profession will be.

Third, and before you accuse me of hallucinating and needing medical treatment myself, what then will all Health Science Librarians need to study if they are to meet the challenge in the next three years?

- We need to train in adult learning theory and teaching techniques (some posts now actually ask for a teaching qualification, and training/teaching users is now a central component of our job)
- We will be skilled in IT and database management (which means having the relevant certification)
- We will be expert in web design and content editing
- We will be skilled communicators and presenters (if we are to teach, and persuade others of the necessity of what we do) how else - perhaps this means having knowledge of management theory, together with psychology and organizational dynamics.
- We need to be skilled researchers, possessing an awareness of different research methodologies
- We need to know how to undertake statistical analysis.
- We need to be confident and capable of producing systematic reviews, and health technology assessments

And once we start thinking and reflecting on this, I think you'll see that this is just the beginning.

But this is where Health Science Librarianship is going.

Here in Ireland, as in the UK, it's no illusion. Where I work for the Mid Western Health Board, my post has involved research into the production of clinical guidelines, which will have a direct impact on the services the Health Board provides. This has meant possessing a very clear understanding of what is happening in other countries, and of concepts such as Clinical Governance. The post has also involved training and having to relate to health care professionals in a number of different contexts and scenarios. I'm not saying that this is what everyone should be doing. However, these are skills which we are not taught, yet are increasingly being expected to possess.

For Health Science Librarians, these are therefore critical times. We can pretend it's all an illusion, and attempt to continue in the mould in which we have been trained. If we do so, we are likely to be marginalized and become increasingly irrelevant within the organizations in which we work. If we rise to the challenge, it won't be easy either, and it's going to mean quite a lot of hard work and learning - but without it we will live in a world of dangerous illusions!