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Reading RX: A Healthy Dose of Knowledge Innovative Approaches to Health Information in Public Libraries

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Abstract

Health information is provided in many different ways in public libraries in North America. Specialized staff and materials, partnerships with hospitals, medical schools, health care providers, and medical information outreach projects and health fairs, are some of the dissemination methods used by public libraries. This paper discusses these methods as well as health information efforts centered on babies and their caregivers.

Health information is in high demand in public libraries throughout America. Most Americans take a very active role in planning their individual health care. Whether it is in making choices to establish a healthier life style, working with their health care provider to determine a new drug to take or discussing medical procedure choices with a doctor, people increasingly are seeking out more information before they make their health decisions. Where do they go to find their information?

People that have computers would turn to easy to use, on-line resources or depend on printed updates from major hospitals and clinics. Many people ask friends or relatives with similar problems and many come to public libraries for help.

Libraries have long been leaders in providing health related information. Books, newspapers, magazines, DVD's, and audiotapes on a diverse range of medical topics have traditionally been part of public libraries collections. Many Libraries have large collections of health dictionaries, reference books and books on alternative and homeopathic medical procedures and drugs.

Also, free pamphlets on particular topics would be available in multiple copies.

Large public libraries would have health librarians on their staff. Although they would not make medical diagnosis, these specially trained staff would be familiar with complex medical terms and be able to provide competent help.

Public Libraries also have worked to provide more targeted health information. Many libraries invite health care providers to library buildings to provide actual health screenings, testing, and give shots. Most cities and/or counties in America have Public Health Departments. Libraries publicize screening programs, provide a private site for screening, and encourage library users to take advantage of the screenings. This program might include blood pressure and cholesterol testing.

Some public libraries allow public Health Departments to give flu shots at library locations. The Health Departments sign a waiver holding the library blameless if there are any individual complications. Some libraries hold health fairs which not only include health screening but also well baby check ups.

The Lexington Public Library in Lexington, KY, partnered with the University of Kentucky's Health Care marketing department to create a health information kiosk program, which is located in the Central Library downtown.

The University Hospital was looking for a method to get its health information – mostly health prevention materials - to people who were not in a hospital. After meeting with library staff, UK decided that the

public libraries would provide an excellent, neutral place to distribute their materials. The hospital is responsible for providing the kiosk and keeping it filled with up-to-date information.

The Library's circulation and reference staff are knowledgeable about what is available and help in the discovery and promotion of the materials. Most info sheets are easy to read, single sheets which include contact information if the person wants additional information.

In the United States, most hospitals, both private and public, are well funded and often are willing to provide information for free to public libraries. Because the information from the Kiosk has been so well used, the hospital is planning to put another one in a branch library.

During the health fair week at the Lexington Public Library, the Library sponsored a "Kentucky Uglies" coloring contest for children ages 12 and under. Kentucky ranks 39 out of 51 in poor overall health. As part of a statewide PR campaign to draw attention to the health problem, the concept of the Kentucky Uglies has been promoted. The Uglies are poor health, poverty and illiteracy. All elementary school children were invited to participate in a bookmark coloring contest. The winning entry was made into a bookmark which has been used for the past year as a promotional item.

Public Libraries located near large health clinics regularly partner with libraries to do their health outreach. Sloan-Kettering in New York, Miami Jackson Children's Hospital in Florida, Mayo Clinic in Rochester, MN, Cleveland Clinic in Cleveland, OH, and Loma Linda clinic in California are but a few examples. Public Libraries use their cable TV stations, as well as monthly calendars, to advertise these information programs. Recurring topics include ways to stop smoking, eliminating obesity, drug and alcohol control, good eating habits, and diabetes. Both the Broward County Library in Ft. Lauderdale and the Miami-Dade County Public Library are some of the United States public libraries that offer health materials in other languages.

Good health habits can be promoted at little or no cost. At Lexington Public Library story times for even the youngest children often center around healthy eating. The vegetable alphabet is a health promotion tool used by Children's Librarians.

Veggie tales is an entire series of books, videos, and DVD's that feature such characters as Bob the Tomato, Larry the Cucumber, and Archibald

and Junior the Asparagus, that attempt to change children's thoughts about vegetables.

Public libraries throughout America have centered many of their health information efforts on babies and young children. Focused on themes such as "Born to Read", "Grow with books", and "Babies 1st Library Card" promote the importance of reading to the healthy mind of a baby.

These kits are distributed by the Lexington Public Library, in English or Spanish, to every baby born at the University of Kentucky hospital. Items such as growth charts and book lists of age appropriate books to read to your baby, t-shirts and bibs are part of the kits given to new parents. Often they contain a refrigerator magnet with poison control numbers on it, an emergency telephone contact list, which would include hospital and nurse information line numbers.

The University of Kentucky signs up moms for 9 months of prenatal information through Doctors' offices and public libraries.

Public Libraries with meeting rooms allow non-profit groups, i.e. American Cancer Society, American Diabetes Association, and the American Lung Association, to hold informational meetings in the building. Libraries help organize health information panels, point people to appropriate health information websites, hold cooking classes for people with certain health conditions, and are always looking for new ways to share and promote quality health information.

Teenagers have many health information needs and look to the anonymity of web searching to find most of their information. The public library can help them find this quality information by providing links to sites such as www.teenhealthandwellness.com, www.kidshealth.org/teen, and www.teenagehealthfreak.org directly from the library web page.

Most of the ideas discussed are free or low cost. Health-related agencies usually are willing to sponsor or fund these health outreach activities. Look in your communities for agencies that would be willing to partner.

Libraries provide health information in a variety of ways. All the usual ones, of course, which include books and Physicians Desk References' with information about drugs. Magazines, like Health, are also available for the general public. JAMA, the Journal of the American Medical

Association, is another magazine that provides useful information. Databases at the library are another source of information which includes the National Library of Medicine, which was only available to medical professionals and is now available to the general public. The public also has access to Information referral services: For example, “My mom has breast cancer. Is there a support group for teens?”

There are other, more direct ways that public libraries are involved in providing health information. Examples include the following: Health fairs for health care providers, hospitals and others who provide information to those who come to a special event at the library. Health related programs, sometimes included with health fairs, are special lectures or programs that are hosted by libraries. These programs are usually open to anyone who attends and might be on a specific topic, like immunization for children, or living with Alzheimer’s disease. Testing programs may also be provided at a library, like vision screening for pre-schoolers or blood pressure testing for senior citizens. Counselors may be present at specific times – for asthma or chronic disease consultations.

Partnerships are essential to providing these special services. There are many potential partners in providing such information. Examples include local health care workers, government departments of health, universities and organizations that specialize in specific diseases. They can provide the content or the program while the library can provide the venue and access to the audience these groups want to reach.

A good partner is willing to collaborate, share common objectives – like the desire to get information to a common audience and has resources to bring to the table. Resources might be monetary, but often, they are not. Instead, the resource could be information, expertise, access or the ability to get the message out about what the library has to offer.

Some libraries have Health Services Librarians. Brooklyn Public Library in New York City does. This full-time position oversees the information, data bases, and services available. Together with her colleagues, she plans programs, seeks and manages partnerships, and helps all staff to be able to deal with health-related questions.

An area of special focus is the problem of childhood obesity. Programs on building habits for healthy eating and exercise - with fun games and celebrity spokespeople – are presented to children and to their parents. At the District of Columbia Public Library in Washington, D.C., there is a

strong partnership with a local medical school. Health screenings are offered – blood pressure readings, cholesterol testing, and information on AIDS and on safe sex practices.

This library also has a strong partnership with the National Diabetes Association. There is an electronic data kiosk which provides information, and their staff is available at specific hours at the library to provide nutrition and life style counseling. In some cases, federal or local government funds are available for these programs. Good information is also available from web sites or from local organizations. For example, Asthma Action America offers brochures and programs to libraries through the web page of the Public Library Association, a division of the American Library Association. The National Breast Cancer Coalition also offers guides to quality care on their web site.

Libraries provide health information because a healthy population matters to everyone – for economic and other reasons. Public libraries in the US receive the majority of their funding from the local government – cities or counties, some state funding (varies from state to state) and almost no federal funding. The agenda of the funding entity affects public libraries. Increasingly, health-related matters are important to local governments and the public library can now be a part of the solution to the problems that local governments identify. Providing services that lead to better health is only one way public libraries work in concert with other public entities.