

# Helping Public Library Patrons Find Medical Information— The Reference Interview

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**ABSTRACT.** Public libraries are often the first access point for additional information resources on health and medical topics. We, as librarians, must be aware of our role in the information seeking process, and communicate with the patron effectively in order to direct them to appropriate resources. Particular attention must be given in the reference interview, including adequate follow-up support and consideration for protecting confidentiality. This paper discusses elements of the reference interview and describes measures that can be taken to avoid personal liability while directing patrons to health information resources. [*Article copies available for a fee from The Haworth Document Delivery Service: 1-800-342-9678. E-mail address: <getinfo@haworthpressinc.com> Website: <<http://www.HaworthPress.com>> © 2000 by The Haworth Press, Inc. All rights reserved.*]

**KEYWORDS.** Reference, reference interview, liability

Public librarians often have the opportunity to assist patrons in locating resources to meet their medical or health information needs. Individuals come to the library with the desire to extend, confirm or refute what has been learned from health care professionals (Rees, 1982). Often, public libraries are the first access point to additional information resources. We, as librarians, must be aware of our role in the information seeking process, and communi-

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cate with the patron effectively in order to ascertain their need, their purpose, and their access to health information resources. Particular attention must be given in the reference interview, including adequate follow-up support and consideration for protecting confidentiality.

When someone approaches the reference desk to ask a health-related question, their purpose could be to find information for themselves, a family member, or close friend. Often the information need rises out of a medical diagnosis or symptom. Patrons may come to the library before their doctor's visit in order to research their symptoms, or after receiving news at the physician's office. As Rees states, "Individuals are motivated by the desire to identify, alleviate, and remedy diseases and ailments; by the need to preserve health and prevent disease; and by the desire to access supporting services in their communities that can assist them in coping with the financial, social, and economic impact of illness" (Rees, 1982).

Conducting a reference interview is a vital component of helping the patron find relevant information. During the interview, the librarian seeks to identify the users' specific need for health information by asking specific questions which aid in defining their need (McClure, 1982). The purpose of the reference interview is to help clarify the question asked by the library user in order to direct them to information sources which will answer the question. The librarian's role is to direct the user to information, not to answer the question based on personal knowledge. This is an essential point, particularly with health information. It is important to substantiate all information in reputable sources.

The temptation exists to research and digest information for the user, filtering information through the librarian's personal biases. Often a word that has no meaning to the librarian will trigger an important memory for the patron. If we can guide patrons to the resources and demonstrate how to use them, this sets them on a personal fact-finding mission.

Part of the process of the reference encounter is demonstrating attentiveness to the patron's needs. This is partially accomplished by listening to the patron, and not interrupting when he or she speaks. On occasion, the medical question posed by the patron may be one that relates to your personal experience. It is important while empathizing to not identify too closely with the patron. It is never appropriate to share a personal experience of an illness with a patron. The focus must stay on finding credible sources of information for the patron. As Grover states, "it is important for the professional to develop rapport with the client, to keep an open mind, and to avoid the tendency to predict answers and outcomes" (Grover, 1995). Because health related questions often pertain to the health of the patron or a close family member, there are emotional and personal components that are unique to health information requests.

Open-ended questions can help elicit a more detailed response, where the patron is able to describe the situation in their own terms (Grover, 1995). Questions such as: “What kind of information have you found on this subject?” or “Tell me more about what you’re looking for” are examples of open-ended questions where the patron supplies the details. Re-phrasing their response and repeating it back to the patron is a helpful tool to clarify the information request. Frequently, the information that the patron brings is incomplete or inaccurate in some way. The patron may be unclear of the exact terminology used by the health care provider. In these instances, it may be more appropriate to send the patron back to the health care professional in order to verify information on the personal condition prior to seeking more information based on a vague reference. In any instance of seeking health information, it is important to clarify with the patron that the information found may or may not apply to the patron’s specific condition, and all questions should be directed to their health care professional.

The reference interview will be limited by the degree to which the patron shares the nature of their concern. If it is a sensitive topic, they may only wish to be directed to the section of the library pertaining to health. In this situation, the librarian may be limited to directing the requestor to the resources, demonstrating how to use the table of contents to find a topic, and offering to provide additional resources as needed.

Following up with the patron after they have begun their search will indicate that you are available to help and will allow you to direct them to more resources as needed. You may choose to follow up on the patron by asking “Have you found the information you need?” “Can I help you find additional resources?” or “Please let me know when you need further assistance.” At this time, it may be useful to stress the limitations of your collection, and direct the user to additional sources of medical information in the community. Within your collection, you may have only a few sources for health topics. It is important to offer to direct requestors to other sources of information, insuring them that no source is comprehensive. Even if your resources are limited, preliminary resources can be located, and then the patron could be referred on to other libraries with greater resources. Medical collections may exist at nearby hospitals or academic medical centers. It is recommended to inquire about nearby resources and determine if they would be willing to provide additional assistance to help you answer medical questions the next time there is a need. From within the United States, you can contact the National Library of Medicine’s National Network of Libraries of Medicine at 1-800-338-7657 or <http://www.nlm.nih.gov/libraries/state.html>. This regional office will direct you to a medical library nearby, based on your location.

When a source is used to answer a question via telephone, fax or e-mail, it is essential to mention the source used to help provide information. The user should be able to return to the source and find the same information that was found for them.

Health databases designed for the general public, such as Gale's Health Reference Center and EBSCO's Health Source Plus provide current full-text sources of health information, and are a highly desirable tool in a general health collection. It should be expected that patrons will need some instruction on how to use these databases. With the proliferation of health information on the Internet, it is important when helping patrons to assist them in distinguishing between trustworthy and questionable Internet sites. Guidelines for evaluating Internet sites are recommended for all Internet searching, but particularly for health-related information.

Information designed to answer clinical questions has the tendency to be medically complex and beyond what the general patron can understand. A good example of medical complexity comes when searching the clinical medical journal literature in the MEDLINE database provided from the National Library of Medicine. Literacy levels of medical information need to be evaluated in accordance with your user populations' literacy needs.

Information collected on health-related topics needs to be kept current. Older editions of medical texts may contain outdated information which can be misleading. As Rees states "In view of the rapidly moving frontiers of medicine and the time sensitivity of medical information, weeding of older publications is especially important. With few exceptions, retaining books on most medical topics published earlier than five years ago is not helpful to readers, who may not pay critical attention to publication dates" (Rees, 1995). Older information often provides an incomplete or inaccurate picture of the medical condition.

Librarians must take precautions to avoid misleading the patron, providing faulty information, and avoiding personal liability. Such precautions include providing a collection development policy which contains guidelines for currency of health-related titles, protecting the confidentiality of the patron, and providing written and verbal disclaimers.

It is appropriate to prominently display a disclaimer statement which states the purpose of your health information collection and the limitations of the help that you can provide. It is essential to state that you are able to provide information, but are not able to offer advice or interpretation of that information.

Susan Murray, of the Consumer Health Information Service of the Metropolitan Toronto Reference Library, recommends that disclaimers should be prominently displayed in the public area, printed on brochures or created materials, stamped on materials in subject files, and stamped on materials being mailed (Murray, 1995).

Disclaimer statements can be added to the reference interview to reinforce the facts that more information may be available, that this information may or may not relate to the patron's specific case, and that their health care professional could assist them in knowing how the information found relates to their situation. Rees states "We must communicate that we are librarians, not health professionals, that we are providing information, not advice, that our information may have been superseded by more recent information, that we can not provide interpretation, that there is certain information they must read for themselves, as it might be misunderstood if read over the phone" (Rees, 1982).

Measures to protect confidentiality need to be taken consistently—including refraining from recording names of patrons with their medical topic, and refraining from discussing the nature of the request with other colleagues and friends. Securing a private location to discuss their health concern may be accomplished by moving away from the reference area and into a more private location.

Essential tools for providing health information reference service include a few general health reference books, such as the Merck Manual or the Mayo Clinic Family Health Book, and a medical dictionary. General medical reference books can get users started on any number of subjects, and are more widely usable than a book on one narrowly defined topic—which will have limited use. The dictionary is invaluable in assisting the patron with medical terminology and jargon. Many reference questions can be answered with a dictionary alone.

Collection development aids for health titles are available on the Consumer and Patient Health Information Section's web page at <<http://caphis.njc.org/caphishowto.html#ColDev>>. Alan Rees' 1995 book, *Consumer Health Information Source Book*, includes reviews of health books, databases, toll-free numbers, and other publications geared for the general public.

It is important to have guidelines, standards, or policies for working with health-related questions. Some good examples are ALA's Librarian Code of Ethics <<http://www.ala.org/alaorg/oif.ethics.html>>, Guidelines for Medical, Legal, and Business Responses at General Reference Desks <[http://www.ala.org/rusa/std\\_general\\_ref\\_desk.html](http://www.ala.org/rusa/std_general_ref_desk.html)>, and the Librarian's role in the Provision of consumer Health Information and Patient Education <[http://caphis.njc.org/caphis\\_statement.html](http://caphis.njc.org/caphis_statement.html)>.

There is no shortage of medical information. As the number and variety of resources continue to increase and health and wellness remain as points of individual and corporate interest, our role in helping users find health information will continue to expand and grow. Through a well-designed reference interview, you can meet the information needs of your users, as well as limit your legal liability in providing health information.

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