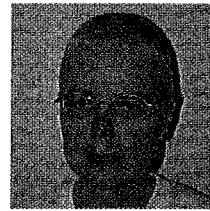


New look for library services



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Libraries are facing challenges as the use of internet search engines increases and networked information facilities are becoming the service of choice. Catherine Ebenezer reports on plans for a new national library for health that will integrate electronic resources and existing NHS library collections.

Over the past few years, *RCM Midwives Journal* has carried several articles about the National electronic Library for Health (NeLH), (Jackson-Baker et al, 2001; Rosen et al, 2002; Ebenezer, 2003). NeLH was established six years ago in response to the 1998 NHS information strategy document, *Information for health*. Since its inception, NeLH has had a pivotal role in enhancing access to health information for NHS clinicians and managers within England. It has complemented the collections and services offered by NHS libraries, being used by around 200 000 people every month. It has a strong identity as a source of authoritative evidence and best practice to support health care. The clinical databases and full-text journals have been a particularly valuable asset.

In organisational terms, the development of NeLH took place entirely separately from that of NHS library services. Recently the pattern of NHS library service delivery has been determined by the health services guideline *Library and information services* (1997). This focused attention on the importance of library services for the development of evidence-based practice and patient care, and the need for access to the best evidence. The principle was established that NHS libraries should be multidisciplinary and meet the needs of all staff groups. Every Trust was required to produce its own strategy for library services. A programme of library and information service modernisation followed, including access to the internet (sometimes very much against the wishes of Trust information technology (IT) departments!), development of intranets, region-wide contracting for electronic content, and a focus on user education. A national library accreditation framework (the HeLiCon scheme) was developed, and national contracts established for the purchase of books and electronic resources. Subsequently, service provision and development were influenced by NHS continuing professional development and lifelong learning policies, and the NHS plan. *Shifting the balance of power* (2001) led to a major reorganisation of NHS library structures, and has focused library resources at workforce development confederation level.

Following a recommendation by the office of government commerce (OGC), the NHS national knowledge service commissioned a review of NHS library policy. This was carried out by a private sector

consultancy organisation, TFPL, and published in April 2004, (Herman et al, 2004). This report identified a number of urgent challenges to NHS library services.

Libraries of all kinds are facing increasing competition from search engines such as Google, which has become an information service of first resort for many users in preference to library catalogues. The acceleration towards provision of digital, networked information services has been a trend in all areas of academic and professional library work. The open access movement within scholarly publishing, and proliferation of institutional e-print archives, has accentuated this trend (House of Commons science and technology select committee, 2004). Within the NHS, organisational changes and reconfigurations of service patterns have often had the effect of cutting off clinical staff from easy access to library services. This is a particular problem for mental health and primary care staff, whose organisations are dispersed in numerous small sites across a wide geographical area. There is a need for library services to integrate better with other NHS knowledge initiatives.

The report suggested, moreover, that there were at present a number of strategic weaknesses in the organisation of NHS library services. Their distribution and funding is historically determined – in some areas local services are fragmented, leading to duplication and gaps. There is a lack of coordination in some areas between national and local initiatives. Many NHS libraries are small and relatively poorly staffed – there is a lack of workforce capacity and skills to support new ways of working (Toth, 2004). Readers may well have encountered some of these problems for themselves in using NHS libraries. There are other issues that the report could have mentioned, such as the difficulty of coordinating services between academic and NHS libraries in the same area. Another problem is that the publication and distribution of official documents and report literature ('grey literature') is poorly managed within the NHS, leading to frustration and duplication of effort for libraries in acquiring it.

The concept of a national library for health (NLH), set within a wider clinical knowledge framework, was originated by Muir Gray at the DLNet residential conference held in March 2004 and was agreed at a colloquium for senior NHS librarians (Turner, 2004). Its partners are the NHS library and knowledge

development network (formerly the regional librarians' group), the NHS library advisor, the existing NeLH team, and the NHS core content group.

The aim of the NLH is to integrate electronic resources with physical NHS library collections, so that electronic resources and print-based library services are no longer treated and managed separately. It is intended to build on existing regional and local initiatives, transforming existing NHS libraries into a more closely-coordinated network, and offering a more closely-integrated information service to the NHS. This is planned to occur without closure of library units, undue centralisation, or staff losses. This integrated service is to be based on a national service framework for library services, which will define standards for NHS library services and provide a management framework. It will connect with other library networks, such as those of academic libraries, public libraries, and independent health libraries such as the RCM's own library service (Toth, 2004). The Department of Health spends around £100m to £150m per year on knowledge, of which £30m to £40m is spent on library services, (Toth, 2004). The long-term goal of NLH is to improve the effectiveness of this expenditure. There are two main aims of the NLH programme:

- The changes described above in the way that NHS library services are organised, managed and funded
- The development of new national digital services, based on a common information architecture and integration with the NHS University (NHSU) and the National programme for IT in the NHS (NPfIT).

The first stage of NLH is planned for delivery from November 2004. It will include a number of new NHS-wide services, as follows:

- An NHS search engine, being developed by the library system vendor Fretwell-Downing. This will integrate regional NHS library catalogues with nationally-available electronic resources
- An NHS-wide primary care current awareness service. This project is being coordinated by primary care librarians within the NHS, and will supersede existing local current awareness services
- Support for NPfIT through integrating

library content with the *Map of Medicine*. This is a knowledge support tool for doctors which is being developed at the Royal Free Hospital by Medic-to-Medic, and is being rolled out as part of NPfIT. NHS librarians are being encouraged to become involved in generating local content for it

- Integration of library content with the research task pane in Microsoft Office 2003 – being developed as part of the NHS-Microsoft enterprise-wide agreement
- An NHS e-print server, enabling NHS staff to make electronic copies of research papers quickly and easily
- A pilot answering service for clinical questions
- A pilot national document delivery service.

There are further plans for a trial of e-books services, and for more extensive shared cataloguing. Eventually there are plans to work on the development of new 'specialist libraries' to add to those already part of NeLH, that will continue. These include the specialist library for women's health in which the RCM is participating. The specialist libraries of potential usefulness to midwives already include child health, diabetes, health informatics, health management, public health and screening. These speciality libraries provide quick and easy access to the best available information. They are intended to be both collections of material and communities of practice for all those interested in generating, organising, mobilising and utilising knowledge (Brice et al, 2003).

Underpinning the change programme are other plans:

- A user survey of NHS staff, for further consultations with NHS librarians
- An analysis of existing NHS library funding, in order to understand present arrangements, identify threats, and propose a new funding model
- Professional development for librarians, delivered online
- A more unified approach to content acquisition and management
- A communications strategy to engage stakeholders, principally strategic health authorities (Toth, 2003).

A new NLH website is due to launch on 15 November 2004. This date marks the start of Health Libraries Week, at which the NLH will

be officially launched. The RCM library will not be running any special events this year for the week, but will be publicising the NLH using the officially-supplied promotional material. More information about NLH may be found at: www.library.nhs.uk and on the DLnet weblog at: www.dlnet.blogspot.com. More detailed information about the proposals for NHS library services is available at: www.library.nhs.uk/roadshowresponses.htm

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