

On the road to health

The journey to our information destination takes many routes for Health Libraries Section members. We work in a wide variety of organisations, including large teaching hospitals and university libraries, smaller local and private hospitals, state and federal government departments, community health centres, health promotion services, pharmaceutical companies, medical book suppliers and publishers, as well as information technology and supply services. We serve an equally diverse range of clients, from those working within health service organisations – health professionals, academics, students, researchers, and fellow librarians – to members of the public wanting information directly related to the health concerns of themselves and their families.

Excellence in patient care requires the timely access and provision of relevant information, so health libraries have always been amongst the first to embrace new information technologies that can achieve this goal. Medline was one of the first electronic databases available – there are now a multitude providing all aspects of health information from international, national and local sources, and which may be reached via commercial vendors, AARNet, the Internet or a combination of these routes.

The current emphasis on preventative health care also requires that good information is available when it is needed.

Developments in technology have taken place against a background of increasing rationalisation and cuts to the funds available for health care generally in Australia. Our members have had to become pioneers in finding new, cost-effective routes, and have also had to learn how to encourage our health bureaucrats to become partners on our journey. Some have had more success than others. Our members need to

become more proficient in taking on board management strategies and tools which ensure that our destination and those of the organisations we work for are the same, otherwise we run the risk of more cuts to our services, perhaps even closure. To this end we are becoming proficient providers of information about these tools, including casemix, accreditation, TQM, and managed care.

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Librarians have always been good at networking, those in the health field especially so! Gratisnet is probably the best example of voluntary, but formal partnership, now involving five states, and 300 health industry organisations. Its members provide reciprocal interlibrary loans to one another, based on a union list maintained in partnership with the University Co-operative Bookshop. It has resulted in significantly reduced costs of obtaining journal articles, and shares resources effectively amongst its members. It has been especially welcome during the last few years of the falling Australian dollar and greatly increasing journal subscription costs.

Perhaps our most effective partnerships need to be those we have with our clients. The volume of health related material now being published is overwhelming, both for us and them.

We need to develop and maintain excellent reference skills so that we can ascertain as accurately as possible what it is our clients require, and thus provide them with material to help them on the way to their destination. If we can show that we are proficient travellers to the Destination Information, our clients will agree that with libraries it's possible, and come back for more!

ALIA Health Libraries Section

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