

Librarian as lymph gland?

Cleo Wilkinson, librarian, photographer, artist...

I am solo medical librarian and photographer for a large pathology company servicing the information needs of more than 2000 staff, doing everything from shelving, database searching, and ordering to budgetting and planning the future of the library. I have worked as a teacher, public and children's acquisition librarian, and museum artist, and I am a practising artist.

Pathology is a broad discipline covering everything from haematology, immunology, cytology et al. The diversity of enquiries is breathtaking — in one day I can be asked to find anything from an illustration of body snatchers, Latrogenic Cushings Disease Treatment, African standards for bacteria count in second-hand clothes, to ergonomics for microscope laboratory workers. Oh, and can you take a photo of a patient with a mouth ulcer...

I was initially unfamiliar with medicine but I had an eager, enquiring mind and had always been interested in health. A logical and tenacious searcher, I am happy to go out and do widespread reading and exploration to get the results required. As a solo librarian I have had the opportunity to discover my own unique style of information seeking. I also have the compassion and patience to want to know what people really want, why they need it and how they can get it. With medicine sometimes it is a matter of finding different perspectives rather than a definitive answer. And sometimes it involves looking in unexpected places. My aim is to provide answers as seamlessly as possible.

Having a broad knowledge specialisation outside of librarianship has contributed to a type of rugged flexibility and adaptability to changes in technology, working conditions and skills. Every experience has been a building block of knowledge — a foundation to build on — making me able to renew and innovate for the next change.

As an artist I have learnt to trust my instincts and look at serendipity and chance. Studying photography in my visual arts degree has been invaluable in my role as a photographer within the company. Being a practising artist balances me — I can go into my studio at the end of the day, sink my hands into

clay or paint and feel a more balanced and calmer person.

As a museum artist/designer I was analysing, interpreting and synthesising archeologists and scientists ideas into illustrations and displays. As a taxidermist I learnt the basics of anatomy. The importance of clear, concise instructions, explanations, demonstrations was honed while I was a school teacher.

Nurse aiding provided me with an introduction to medical and pharmaceutical terminology as well as hospital and laboratory safety and procedures. I also had the benefit of a first-hand understanding of the needs of patients, especially for information regarding their condition.

I still benefit from the networking and connections I developed as a state and public librarian. Not to mention the experience of working with a wide cross-section of the community and broad range of software and reference tools.

The most powerful tool as an information worker has not been an abstract set of procedures but a broad knowledge-base gleaned from a multitude of experiences and fields. It seems that broadening my experience outside of medicine has helped me better understand how it fits into the world and how connected different disciplines can be.

The mass of information out there is fragmented, incomplete and open to varying interpretation. As an information worker the skills and tools needed are changing but the role is still the same as a traditional librarian. Being very critical, checking the authority of information, evaluating resources, references and content on the web and databases is essential. Using the correct terminology is an art and science in itself.

Information is liquid and forever finding new paths and formats. Like blood it contains masses of information in every drop. Could the lymph gland in the body be a metaphor for the new information worker — filtering, identifying, synthesising, and analysing information flow for the benefit of the organisation and society as a whole — maybe! ■

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