

## **Maintaining a Successful Consumer Health Library Collection**

After the County of Los Angeles's Public Library system had to close down 10 libraries in the early 1990s, the still-standing Carson Regional Library received more funding and became a reliable place for an increased number of patrons to find quality consumer health information.

Two decades prior, Carson Library launched its Consumer Health Information Program and Services (CHIPS)—long before typical public libraries housed separate sections for health-related materials.

Scott Willis, a CHIPS librarian since 1994, has seen CHIPS thrive amid a growing population that is hungry for reliable health information. His expertise as a consumer health information librarian is illustrated in the following Q & A session.

### **Q: What kind of a role does CHIPS play in the community?**

**A:** CHIPS is a system-wide resource. We provide current information to all who contact us so that they may achieve optimum personal health. CHIPS is able to assist patrons from most national, ethnic, religious and socio-economic backgrounds, and when we are not able to sufficiently provide assistance, CHIPS refers patrons to other resources who can help.

### **Q: What is the size and scope of your consumer health information collection, and how do you maintain it?**

**A:** Through the years we have created a more diversified collection that encompasses six ranges of shelves—basically twelve long rows—within the library. Our collection includes health and medical materials in both English and Spanish. We have books, periodicals, reference works, audiocassettes, 16mm films, videocassettes, government publications, newsletters and a pamphlet and clipping file. We also provide Internet access to patrons who want to conduct health information searches.

To maintain the collection I conduct an annual weeding-out session in which I pull from the shelves all the materials that are outdated, have worn out, or were vandalized, which does happen on occasion. Instead of maintaining an overwhelmingly large collection, I try to keep a diverse set of materials that covers all the basic topics, along with topics that are peripheral to general topics. For instance, I have an excellent book that explains chemical warfare and detailed information on anthrax injuries. I also try to find books covering topics that may be otherwise difficult to find.

To keep everything organized, I keep two files for each health condition organized by special subject headings for each specific disease. Patrons can check out one of the files, which is filled with articles and various information I've collected from health fairs and other resources throughout the years. I keep the other file and don't circulate it to other libraries; it has more technical information in it that helps me direct library consumers to other resources. My reference books also stay in the library so that I can maintain my full collection at all times.

**Q: What are the “must haves” to keep in a consumer health library collection?**

**A:** While most people think that the Internet has the best information, books and journals actually have more digestive information. The four “must haves” are:

- **Medical dictionaries.** *Dorland's Illustrated Medical Dictionary* and *Mosby's Medical Dictionary* are helpful to have in my collection. If someone calls me about something I've never heard of, I usually refer to these (for more information see the sites below).  
<http://www.allbookstores.com/book/0721662544> and  
<http://www.medical-dictionaries.com/9-Mosbys-Medical-Dictionary-5th-Edition-book.asp>
- **Reference Books.** I always make sure I collect good general medical reference books because they provide brief descriptions that can lead patrons to more specialized topics and answers. Churchill Livingstone, W.B. Saunders, and Mosby are all good publishing companies. Mosby, for instance, publishes a series of nursing books that illustrate the practicalities of everything health-related, from how to give someone a shot to how to tend to respiratory patients. From these books, patrons can gain a better sense of what actually happens in certain health scenarios as opposed to simply reading technical or medical jargon that is difficult to understand. (For publishing information, see <http://intl.elsevierhealth.com/cl/> and <http://www.us.elsevierhealth.com>.)
- **Journals.** I keep journals such as *American Family Physicians* and *Postgraduate Medicine* (see <http://www.aafp.org/afp.xml> and <http://www.mcgraw-hill-sales.com/indexhealth.htm> for more information). The former has about 300 pages per bi-monthly issue and contains lengthy, detailed articles on particular diseases, causes, symptoms and treatments. It also provides extensive bibliographies, patient handouts and tips from other related journals. *Post-Graduate Medicine* contains one symposium on a certain disease per issue, so it is an excellent resource.
- **Videos.** I make sure to keep a good collection of updated videos on hand. Many people are visual learners or simply don't have time to read all the

information out there, so they will frequently check out videos that pertain to topics such as cancer, surgical procedures, first aid, weight control and exercise, and a variety of other specific topics. We usually order our videos from Vision Quest Entertainment and Aquarius Health Care Videos (see <http://www.visionquestent.com> and <http://www.aquariusproductions.com> for more information).

**Q: How do you organize and keep track of health information requests?**

**A:** I have learned how to effectively search on the Internet, but you can't use the Internet exclusively to find quality information. The Internet must be used as a supplemental resource for finding materials in bound or printed form.

To stay organized, I keep a written record of subject request forms, which include the patron's name, address, phone number, specific question(s) and resources we used to answer that particular question. When I get a similar question, I can easily refer back to the ways in which I helped the other patron. I keep these request forms on file for 18 months at a time and often distribute them to other local libraries.

**Q: What advice would you give to other public librarians?**

**A:** As a public librarian, the most important advice I have is to be as humane and empathetic as possible. Our job can be emotionally draining at times because of the nature of the topic and how we interact with people who may have just been diagnosed with something like cancer or multiple sclerosis.

That's why I believe it is so important to treat each patron as an individual with valid and important requests. Even if I have answered the same question five different times in one morning, by the fifth person I still offer an empathetic ear and try to help them to the best of my ability.

**Q: What is the most rewarding aspect of your job?**

**A:** A lot of patrons call me about a serious illness that their doctors have just diagnosed but didn't tell them much about, and it's my job to help them understand their conditions without actually giving them advice about how to manage their health. People usually come to me at the stage that they are desperate to find quality information, and once they find what they are looking for, they will hopefully be empowered and have a certain sense of control over their emotional, mental and physical well-being.

My job is challenging in many ways, but in the end the rewards are seemingly far greater than the emotional strain. I have the power to really help my patrons understand their medical conditions and find the exact information

they are looking for, and that gives me a feeling of accomplishment each and every day.