

Making Health Information Accessible to All

When Cathy Woolbright's chronic headaches went undiagnosed by several doctors, she decided to take matters into her own hands. She conducted research in her local public library and discovered that three generations in her family suffered from what is commonly known today as migraine headaches. Because of her library research, Woolbright and other members of her family were properly diagnosed and treated and will now spend much less money on headache remedies.

Her personal experience transformed Woolbright into an advocate of developing health information centers in public libraries. Now she helps others learn more about their illnesses so that they can ask their physicians smarter questions and do a better job of managing their own health.

"Patients who seek out their own health information feel more in control of their situations, and they are better prepared to communicate with their doctors," says Woolbright, Director of the Simon Schwob Medical Library in Columbus, Georgia.

An experienced medical librarian, Woolbright knows which health information resources provide the most valuable information to the general public. She says that much of the technical information available in her library is not appropriate for those without a medical background. A growing number of books, Web sites and medical journals, however, are now written in a style that is more accessible to the general public.

Sharing Her Expertise

Woolbright shares her expertise with public librarians and their patrons on an ongoing basis. With support from the National Network of Libraries of Medicine (NN/LM), she recently worked with eight libraries from six Georgia counties to provide training classes on the NN/LM and its role in aiding library consumers, including how to conduct Web searches on health-related topics and how to use the popular medical resource Web site called MEDLINEplus®, <http://www.medlineplus.org>.

To inform library patrons about the classes, Woolbright advertised on a community bulletin board in each library. The classes provided hands-on assistance and informational notebooks filled with contact numbers, consumer health information Web site addresses and ample space to jot down notes from the lesson. The classes included time for patrons to conduct their own research on health issues and ask questions about what they had learned.

One of the most valuable ways of ensuring that library patrons use what they learn is to follow-up. After the training sessions, Woolbright revisited those same eight libraries on two different occasions to see what patrons had learned. Woolbright remembers one elderly woman in particular who, because of her debilitating arthritis, could not move the computer mouse without someone else's help. The woman

came back several times to learn more about how to research her health condition in between doctor visits.

Health Information for Non-English Speakers

Woolbright's library caters to a large minority population. Her collection is bilingual and is set up so that patrons who speak Spanish or other foreign languages can easily understand and familiarize themselves with health topics.

She set up a Spanish language resource center at a Marion County, GA health clinic, despite the fact that she does not speak Spanish. With the help of an on-site translator, she was able to teach the clinic's Spanish-speaking patrons how to access Spanish-friendly sites such as Healthfinder® Español, <http://www.healthfinder.gov/espanol/> — a comprehensive list of selected health topics, medical definitions and healthcare information — and New York Online Access to Health, or NOAA, <http://www.noah-health.org/spanish/spnypl.html> — a bilingual health information site complete with its own search engine, browsing access and additional links to other helpful health information sites in Spanish.

Woolbright says that the most effective method of teaching people who are not English speakers how to find healthcare information online is by using mirror Web sites, or those that read exactly the same in English and Spanish. When mirror sites are not the right health information choice, one of Woolbright's associates translates the information to make sure it meets the medical libraries' previously endorsed library guidelines.

Developing a New Library Model

Her years of expertise in disseminating library health information will now pay off in new ways. Woolbright is helping to oversee the development of a new cancer center that will encompass three separate libraries: one for consumer education, a second for nurse professionals and a third for physicians. The consumer library will house computer stations with interactive learning modules and provide links to important cancer information sites, models and books. The library for nurses will be located near primary care centers, and the physician library will be available as a satellite library, or a combination of Internet links and ready references.

Woolbright plans to design the cancer center's consumer library as an open, welcoming environment without barriers—a place where patrons can feel comfortable enough to self-educate, communicate, gain control over their medical conditions and get answers to their health questions.

“Librarians whose libraries house consumer health information have the ability to be helpful and sensitive to their patrons' health questions as they consider their specific health concerns, questions and needs,” she says. “And in medical libraries, these skills are just as critical.”

Cathy Woolbright
Director, Simon Schwob Medical Library
Columbus, GA