

Medical librarians

A medical career entails the constant pursuit of information. **Helen Elwell** explains **how to make the most of the skills and knowledge of medical librarians**

Medical information is essential for patients' care, research, and when writing for publication. Increasingly though, this pursuit is becoming more challenging, requiring specialist skills.

Increase in medical information

Evidence based medicine requires you to appraise critically the information you use to inform your clinical decision making. You will also need online searching skills to get the most out of the resources available on your computer. Added to all this is the fact that medical information is increasing at a phenomenal rate, making it easy to feel frustrated or pressurised. It is in this environment that a medical librarian can step in and give you the support you need.

A number of different types of support are on offer. A librarian is not only an information expert, able to advise on best resources, but also a trainer and a service provider. Medical librarians have good credentials, and so armed with a few tips you will be able to make better use of their help.

Medical librarians are professionally qualified. They have either a graduate or a postgraduate qualification, which has been accredited by the Chartered Institute of Library and Information Professionals. The most common route is to have a postgraduate qualification. Typically, a medical librarian has an MSc, an MA, or a postgraduate diploma.

Services

You can expect the following range of services to be available whether you are at medical school, working for an NHS trust, or approaching a professional organisation such as the BMA or the Royal Society of Medicine:

- Inquiry services
- Loan and interlibrary services
- Document delivery services (both standard and premium or urgent services)
- Access to electronic journals
- Alerting services (such as tables of contents alerts for selected journals or regular update searches on a chosen topic)
- Online literature search services
- Training in online searching skills
- Training in critical appraisal techniques

This list may contain surprises. Top of the list is inquiries, and these are still valuable despite the ready availability of information on the web. You may still just want to pick up a phone and talk to

someone, so this is a useful starting point. It gives you an opportunity to explain exactly what you are looking for, and the librarian, in turn, can use his or her specialist knowledge to answer your query. They can also advise you about other library services at the same time.

Electronic delivery

With loan, interlibrary loan, and document delivery services, the move towards electronic delivery continues. Already services exist where you can have an electronically scanned copy of an article emailed to you. The BMA library provides this service, and if you are an NHS doctor you can access a wealth of information through the National Library for Health website. This website hosts the NHS Core Content Collection, which (among other things) provides access to full text articles from over 1000 journals. The National Library for Health website provides access to the Cochrane database of systematic reviews and has a library of e-books. Electronic delivery services are also available through NHS library websites.

Alerting services are a way to keep up to date with all developments within your specialty. A table of contents alerts service is available via the NHS Core Content Collection on the National Library for Health website. The Royal Society of Medicine has electronic monthly updates for its members, and the BMA offers a selected dissemination of information service, where a weekly targeted search is run on Medline and the results sent by email.

Literature search services (the searches are usually done on Medline) are widely available across all sectors. Do make the most of these search services as a study has shown that an inexperienced searcher may find only 15% of the total available on Medline, compared with the 45% retrieved by a professional searcher.

Online searching

You are probably finding that online searching skills are becoming more desirable if you are truly going to take advantage of all the different information resources available. It is here that the training provided by medical librarians is vital. Access to online databases such as Medline is widely available, and it is essential to have training on how to search these databases to retrieve relevant results. Medical librarians give this training along with other courses covering health information on the internet and critical appraisal skills. You may also find courses on the use of reference management software, such as Reference Manager and EndNote, in larger medical school libraries because these courses are relevant to medical students.

Knowing what is available is a start, but gaining access to all these services can be confusing. The best way is to go exploring, and you will find that you probably have access to more than one set of services. In addition to having services from your trust, you should make the most of others provided through membership of professional organisations and royal colleges. Visit their websites and bear in mind that you may need to log in to gain access to all services on offer. Do not be put

off by this. If you have any problems, ring the inquiry service for guidance-their contact details are normally quite prominent on web pages (box 1).

Useful websites

- National Library for Health- www.library.nhs.uk

Cherry picking time

You will find that the services themselves vary, so cherry pick the ones that suit you best. For example, do you prefer to use the Ovid interface when searching Medline or the Dialog DataStar interface? Do you wish to keep up to date by viewing the table of contents for a few selected journals or do you prefer regular searches on Medline? Do you prefer group training or one to one? You will probably find that you have a choice. It also makes good sense to form a working relationship with librarians, keeping yourself in the loop as services develop. The NHS is undergoing major changes in how it uses and manages information under the national programme for information technology, and library services are part of this development. To a lesser extent perhaps, all libraries constantly review their services and you need to make sure that you are aware of anything new that could be useful.

It is probably true to say that all professional groups have their idiosyncrasies, and librarians are no exception. The tips in box 2 will help you to get the best response to your query.

Some tips on getting the most out of your library

- Be explicit about what type of information you are looking for and the depth of your research
- Discuss what resources you have already tried
- Be prepared to explain your topic. You are the specialist
- Be realistic about what can be achieved immediately. (A librarian may have to give you a quick response followed by more detail later)

Be active in making use of all the services, and tell your librarian what you found useful. This helps at a time when services are evolving. Your input will ensure you continue to have your needs met.

Tips on...Improving your medical English

- Fluent English is a staple skill for every medical student hoping to study or practice in an English speaking country. From clerking patients to effective communication of research findings to major presentations at international conferences, English has a central role in exchange of valuable medical information around the world.
- Here are some tips on how to improve your English, particularly if you are from a country where you are not taught in English.
- If you are a beginner, go for an official scheme, like TOEFL (test of English as a foreign language), IELTS (international English language testing system), or the University of Cambridge ESOL (English for speakers of other languages) examinations. Studying for it will not only develop your general reading, listening, writing, and speaking skills, but once you pass the final examination, you will get a certificate that will hold you in good stead if you want to work in an English speaking country. This may be compulsory in some countries

- Learn at least five new words every day. Try using them in daily conversations. If you do not have an English speaking companion, try making up a couple of sentences on your own for each new word you learn
- Remember that spoken English is as important as written English. Try watching channels like BBC World or CNN International. The BBC's World Service and Radio 4 have several medical and scientific shows and can be accessed freely online
- Medical English differs to a certain extent in North America and in the UK and other Commonwealth countries, and textbooks and publications tend to have a particular style in each case. Always choose the textbooks you identify most with, but if you're planning to work in specific countries, start investing in the material that is most suitable to your career plans
- All medical subjects tend to have introductory textbooks and advanced textbooks containing expert monographs. After becoming familiar with the fundamentals of a topic in the former, try browsing through the same topic in an advanced textbook. Apart from providing more information, advanced texts convey ideas with professional brevity and enrich your vocabulary along the way
- Acquire the habit of reading student journals like the StudentBMJ, McGill Medical Journal, or The New Physician. General medical journals are not only effective in building your vocabulary but also serve to provide valuable information helpful for your practice. Try reading the BMJ, the New England Journal of Medicine and the Lancet
- Novels with medical backgrounds might prove useful, such as Ian McEwan's Saturday. Ordinary novels are also helpful, especially if you want to improve your general English
- Have a good English dictionary by your side, particularly when you're reading novels or journal articles. Even if you don't, underline or write down the words or expressions you're not familiar with so that you can look them up later

Last, but not the least, try writing a few articles for student journals like the *sBMJ*. Your articles may not always get accepted. But failure is a stepping stone to success.

Tiago Villanueva, junior doctor, Centro Hospitalar de Lisboa-zona central, Lisbon, Portugal

Email: tiago.villanueva@gmail.com

Balaji Ravichandran, student editor,, Student BMJ

Editor's note: For several unavoidable reasons, this is the last "Tips On" article in studentBMJ.

Further submissions to this section will not be considered.

studentBMJ 2006; 14: 397-440 November ISSN 0966-6494