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Heather J. Martin
Providence St. Joseph Health

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Hospital Librarians: Training the Next Generation of Doctors

by **Heather J. Martin,**
MIS^t, AHIP

Director of System Library Services,
Providence St. Joseph Health
Heather.Martin@providence.org



HEATHER J. MARTIN, MIS^t, AHIP, serves as the director of system library services for Providence St. Joseph Health. Based out of Portland, OR, Heather directs the staff of 12 physical libraries, which serve 50 hospitals, affiliated clinics, and medical groups across the western United States. She led the integration of the library services and resources across Providence St. Joseph Health and the successful move to an entirely electronic centralized collection. She is passionate about keeping medical libraries vital and responsive to patron needs and navigating the ongoing seas of change in both healthcare and libraries.

Abstract

Hospital librarians address a wide array of information needs. They help nurses figure out how to take care of patients, help physicians with difficult cases, help families get reliable health information, and sometimes the information they provide even helps save a life. They also play an important role in training the next generation of doctors. At one hospital in Oregon, Providence St. Joseph Health System Library Services has integrated traditional library instruction directly into the curriculum of the Internal Medicine Residency Program.

Introduction

Providence St. Joseph Health (PSJH) System Library Services has a staff of 16 librarians and library paraprofessionals dedicated to meeting the information needs of a diverse group of patrons: the employees and medical staff of the PSJH healthcare system. The library staff supports patient care, scientific research, business, and continuing education needs of employees and medical staff, but is also a key part of training the future healthcare workforce as well. The library provides resources and services to support employees who are obtaining academic degrees to advance their career in healthcare, as well as education support and training for the School of Health Professions of the affiliated University of Providence, and the many graduate medical education programs located in hospitals across the health system. As the librarians located at medical schools play a key role in the education of our future doctors, so too do hospital librarians as they work with new doctors during their time in medical residency.



Background

PSJH is currently the fourth largest not-for-profit healthcare system in the United States (Rege, 2017). Consisting of 50 hospitals and hundreds of clinics spread across seven western states, PSJH employs over 111,000 employees (Providence St. Joseph Health, 2018). As of January 2018, the libraries across the PSJH enterprise have formed a unified and fully integrated department providing library services and resources as a shared service; this means all 111,000 employees are potential library patrons.

Coming together as system-wide library service has meant an elimination of information haves and have-nots, and it ensures that all employees, regardless of job title or location, have access to the same evidence-based resources and high-quality library services (Huffman, Martin, & Delawska-Elliott, 2016). These services include reference and literature search services, document delivery and interlibrary loan, table of contents service, and database training and instruction. Patron requests could include a nurse who is looking for evidence and best practices to support a change in procedures or a new policy; a pharmacist who needs to know the contraindications for a particular drug combination; an executive who is trying to find research on what interventions can impact patient satisfaction; or implications for healthcare cost savings from a new department initiative.

To Fish or to Teach to Fish

While much of the work of hospital librarians is to serve business as well as patient care needs, these professionals also play an important role in the education of students, fellows, and residents who pass through or are employees of the healthcare system. Unlike an academic library, where the primary focus is on teaching patrons how to search for literature themselves, in a hospital library the librarian will perform literature searches him or herself and provide the patron with a list of citations or full-text articles. The “fish for a person” approach is an important part of the library’s services, as clinicians and healthcare workers have limited time and, often, minimal database searching skills; indeed, the stakes of conducting poor research can be high in terms of cost to the institution or, sometimes, even patient life and death.

However, the “teach a person to fish” approach is also a key part of what a hospital librarian does. Database instruction is available for all PSJH patrons and offered to individuals and groups, in person, or remotely through webinars or Skype meetings. This focus on teaching is vital for certain patron groups where learning how to formulate a clinical question, develop a search strategy, and find an article can be as important as finding the article itself. Medical interns and residents are one such group.

Medical Residency at Providence St. Joseph Health

After graduating from medical school, physicians must complete a residency program in order to become fully licensed and board certified before they can practice independently. Residency can take three to seven years depending on specialty, with the first year considered an internship year, usually taking place at a teaching hospital (Association of American Medical Colleges, n.d.; Thompson, A. E., 2014).



Providence St. Joseph Health has 17 medical residency programs, 32 fellowship programs, and additional hospitals that serve as the teaching hospital affiliate for university-based residency programs (Providence Health & Services, 2018). While the library services are an important part of the education and clinical practice of ALL medical residents at PSJH, the amount of involvement with the individual residency programs differs across the health system. The librarians interact with the residents in different ways, formal and informal. Variables include historical infrastructure and institutional culture; the strength of relationships between the library, program administration, and faculty; self-identified needs of the residency program; and time availability within the curriculum.

At some hospitals, the librarians may do a brief presentation during orientation on all the library has to offer; at others, information about the library may simply be included in the welcome packet given to interns/residents. Some librarians attend or even present at regular lunchtime education conferences or during problem-based learning sessions, which involve integration of evidence-seeking and database-searching skills in an investigation of a clinical case. At other locations, librarians are not integrated into the formal curriculum but, rather, work with individual residents upon request.

Providence Portland Medical Center Internal Medicine Residency Program

At Providence Portland Medical Center, the library has been formally integrated into the Internal Medicine Residency Program for many years. This three-year program has 10 interns and nine residents in each of years two and three. This integration has ensured that all incoming interns and residents are given an introduction to library services and resources, and that they're able to build on the foundation of evidence-based medicine and a spirit of inquiry and lifelong learning established in medical school. Moreover, the practice is consistent with the current trend towards more embedded library instruction (Just, 2012).

During an intern's first year, there is a required, two-week-long "Evidence-Based Medicine" (EBM) rotation where the librarian serves alongside internists and subspecialists as part of the EBM faculty (Providence Health & Services, 2018). Evidence-Based Medicine can be defined as "the conscientious, explicit, and judicious use of current best evidence in making decisions about the care of individual patients" (Sackett et al, 1996, p. 71). During this rotation, each intern works on their own EBM project and presents it to residents and faculty. At the beginning of the rotation, the librarian provides each intern with a one-on-one overview of the library, deeper instruction on searching Medline (the primary health sciences database), and guidance on building a search strategy for the intern's individual topic.

During the second year, all residents are assigned to a "Quality Improvement" (QI) rotation where they work in small teams to develop and carry out projects focused on improving quality of care in the hospital or community clinic. The US Health Resources & Services Administration defines Quality Improvement as "... systematic and continuous actions that lead to measurable improvement in healthcare services and the health status of targeted patient groups" (2011, p.11). It states that successful QI projects need to "develop staff ... skills in information retrieval, such as, conducting literature searches and accessing databases" (U.S. Dept. Health & Human Services, 2011, p. 11). Teaching these skills is the primary way the librarian supports the resident's QI rotation.

The residents come to the library session at the beginning of their second-year rotation having already been assigned a QI project. Some of them have done preliminary searching



and have hit roadblocks. Others come with a single article they have been given by a faculty mentor to use as a starting point. A few have not begun at all and are still formulating an idea for the direction of their literature search. The librarian provides a refresher on literature searching and leads an in-depth conversation on how to find needed research or identify evidence gaps. Past QI projects have included an initiative that focused on preventing catheter-associated urinary tract infection in the intensive care unit, and one that developed a curriculum for residents to learn basic bedside ultrasound skills (Providence Health & Services, 2018). For the latter project, the librarian was involved in working with the resident on developing a literature search strategy, doing a literature search to fill in some evidence gaps, and providing articles through interlibrary loan.

Conclusion

The library integration into the Providence Portland Internal Medicine Residency Program curriculum has been considered successful. The library staff continues to be invited to serve as faculty year after year, and resident evaluations of the sessions are consistently positive. The library's impact has gone beyond just the residents and has touched faculty as well, as librarians participate in faculty development sessions that focus on answering clinical questions by using evidence found in library resources.

Despite overall success, challenges remain. Some interns don't have their EBM rotations scheduled until late in the first year and therefore don't have an introduction to the library or an awareness of the resources and support available to them until near the end of their intern year. Sometimes residents come to the library after an overnight shift or a long week, and maintaining their attention and energy during the session can be difficult. Librarians continue to stay nimble to adjust their approach as the EBM and QI rotation curriculum changes and to be able to adapt to the varied research abilities that each resident brings to the session.

The PSJH library staff is focused on continuous improvement, ensuring that instruction is meaningful and memorable to residents. From the perspective of the larger health system, the library plans to build on the successes at the Oregon hospital and work to touch all interns and residents throughout the organization in a more direct way. Hospital librarians are essential to ensuring that new physicians have the skills they need to truly practice evidence-based medicine; directly embedding library research training in graduate medical education programs has emerged as one successful way to do this. 

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