



Libraries are Good for You

How Libraries Support Researchers, Practitioners and People to Meet SDG3

Access to information is a driver of development. The possibility to find, understand, and apply facts enables people to take better decisions, for themselves and for those around them. Those who suffer from 'information poverty', in contrast, can miss out on opportunities, and make sub-optimal choices that harm their life chances.

Health is a case in point, where access to the right information can quite literally be a question of life-and-death. This applies as much to doctors researching a new medical procedure or researchers evaluating the risk of an outbreak of an epidemic.

It also matters for individuals whose lifestyle choices can make the difference between contracting diseases or living healthily. Indeed, there is growing awareness that it is far more cost-effective to promote health (through enabling people to live better lives) than to combat disease (with more of a focus on expensive treatments and cures)¹.

This shift in thinking represents an important opportunity to make the case for access to information – and the libraries that have the skills and spaces to provide it for everyone – as a key factor in delivering Sustainable Development Goal 3. This highlights the obligation to ensure healthy lives and promote well-being for all at all ages², which only confirms the focus on the need for health promotion, not just responding to disease.

In support of this argument, this article brings together a far-from-exhaustive set of examples of how libraries have demonstrated their potential to support health, through their contribution to research, through their support to practitioners, and by working directly with people. All examples come from papers presented at IFLA's World Library and Information Congress³.

At the Heart of the Health Research Infrastructure

Research in any area is based on the ability to find and build on available information. Without this, findings risk either being inaccurate, or simply duplicating work that has taken place before. Neither are good outcomes, given the need to use research resources most effectively to improve lives.

Health librarianship and health and biosciences libraries are well established within the broader global library field, contributing to the work of medical researchers. Through building and giving access to collections of relevant works, they provide an essential ingredient for efforts to advance human knowledge. Libraries have also been strongly involved in the effort to promote open access, both specifically to benefit institutions in developing countries⁴, and globally⁵.

Libraries are doing more than simply giving access of course. In a number of situations, they are playing a key bridging role with the research process. In South Africa for example, they are playing a role as 'knowledge-brokers', helping accelerate research by spreading new ideas and

¹ Au (2017)

² UN Sustainable Development Goal 3: <https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/sdg3>

³ IFLA World Library and Information Congress: <https://www.ifla.org/annual-conference>. An excellent set of examples can be found also in Dadzie et al (2016)

⁴ See Research4Life: <https://www.research4life.org/>

⁵ See PubMedCentral, which is a full-text online archive of the National Library of Medicine in the United States: <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/>



findings. They are increasingly involved, for example, in performing literature reviews as a basis for new research⁶.

A particularly important tool in health research is the systematic review, where all (or as much as possible) of the relevant research available is brought together, evaluated for its quality, and judgements made about the strength of the evidence in support of a hypothesis. This approach lends itself to the contribution of librarians, given their knowledge of the research in relevant fields, and ability to evaluate sources.

Therefore, when the Africa Centre for Systematic Reviews and Knowledge Translation was set up at Makerere University in Uganda, libraries were central. The librarians took on the task of locating evidence, and indeed performed much of the work involved in systemic reviews, in parallel with more traditional activities around providing access and making individual works accessible for users⁷.

This work is essential. While it is certainly positive that more health research is available than ever before, the ability to evaluate and choose the most reliable sources is more and more important. Fortunately, this is an area where the information literacy skills of librarians come into their own⁸.

Libraries are also proving their worth in more innovative techniques, such as participatory mapping exercises. These look to address the fact that official maps may not in fact be accurate, due to non-reporting by land-owners, or rare updates. By bringing together different sources, it is possible to get a much more accurate overview.

Libraries can provide very good venues for such work, as was the case with the Butler Library at Columbia University, New York, which focused on Puerto Rico in the aftermath of Hurricane Maria. Such work made a major contribution to the work of researchers assessing the risk of disease in the wake of the disaster⁹. Libraries can also, potentially, play a useful role in collecting local-level information about health determinants and characteristics¹⁰.

At the Side of Health Professionals and Practitioners

In parallel with their growing role in support of health research, libraries are also realising their potential to provide direct help to health practitioners – doctors, nurses and other specialists. It is indeed common that, when facing a particular situation, a doctor will need access to the latest research before taking a decision.

There is a growing awareness that libraries have a duty to help professionals working outside of an academic or research setting to get the right result¹¹. They can also provide the backbone of health information networks which ensure that doctors across any country or region have access to the research they need, at any time¹².

⁶ Selematsela and Mawire (2018)

⁷ Kinentyere et al (2015)

⁸ Selematsela et al, *ibid*.

⁹ McGowan (2018)

¹⁰ Au, *ibid*

¹¹ Kasalu and Ojiambo (2015)

¹² Febriyanto and Adiba (2018)



In turn, effective service provision by libraries can help professionals themselves understand the importance of information in their practice. As Chipungahelo et al note, ‘health challenges can be better addressed if credible information about transmission, prevention and treatment are readily available. The need for improved access to evidence based health information has been recognized by public health practitioners, researchers, policy makers, and librarians’¹³.

Providing information is a first key step. Faced with the volume of research available, libraries can apply the same skills as they use to help researchers. Evidence Aid, which builds on the work of librarians, aims to identify the most useful papers and reports to which professionals may need to refer in the field. It focuses in particular on disaster situations, where the right interventions can make a huge difference¹⁴.

Similarly, a library-led projects in Tanzania has led to the creation of many new materials which can be easily used by practitioners in their daily jobs. The process has also supported networking among libraries and a stronger sense of professional mission¹⁵.

At a more basic level still, library projects have also overcome more fundamental barriers to access to research, such as the cost of downloading papers over a mobile data collection. In Uganda, libraries were able to install a connection which allowed health workers to access materials. This provided the opportunity to provide broader training about what information was available and how to use it, as well as to answer questions. The lessons from this work were then further spread into the community by those who had participated¹⁶.

At the Service of Citizens

As highlighted in the introduction, there is an awareness that the best means of reducing disease is to promote health. Given their broader mission to serve their communities’ information needs – and understanding of how to do this best – public libraries can make a major contribution here, complementing the work of more academic- or research-focused colleagues¹⁷.

Even without specific efforts by libraries, it is clear that many people come to seek health-related information. This was the case at the Library of Alexandria, where it was decided to develop specific training programmes about health conditions commonly faced in Egypt, following huge demand from visitors¹⁸.

In Teheran, a well-known public library hosted programmes aimed at helping build health literacy among people with diabetes. This showed positive results on participants of all ages and gender¹⁹.

Libraries have a variety of tools at their disposal to do this. One library in Croatia for example, offered everything from exhibitions of library collections to lectures for people of all ages, storytelling hours, presentations, workshops on positive thinking and health, and bibliotherapy²⁰.

¹³ Chipungahelo et al (2015)

¹⁴ Kuhn and Allen (2018)

¹⁵ Chipungahelo, *ibid*

¹⁶ Musoke (2014)

¹⁷ Tu-Keefner et al. (2018)

¹⁸ Samir (2015)

¹⁹ Kazerani et al (2018)

²⁰ Sabolovic-Krajina (2016)



In Philadelphia, they helped people learn how to cook healthier food, and carried out research into how to help people with asthma having to miss classes²¹.

Importantly, libraries can also provide an entry-point into complex health systems, something that can be very important for those who may not feel comfortable working through layers of administration. This has been the case in Turkey for example²². Libraries can also help ensure that individual citizens know their rights, and how to enforce them²³, or access health insurance²⁴.

The role of the library as a welcoming public space is also important. It can seem less daunting than a formal medical building, and of course gives users a greater sense of anonymity. Given the range of services offered, and the trust they enjoy, libraries can also become an important one-stop-shop for a variety of needs. In the United States, for example, libraries proved to be a logical place to offer tetanus vaccinations and carry out water testing following flooding²⁵. In Croatia, they hosted health professionals such as ophthalmologists in order to carry out check-ups²⁶.

As highlighted above, libraries have a duty to respond to the needs of their communities. They can do this by adapting their own services to needs, and so ensure that everyone's requirements are reflected in health information provision²⁷. Particular effort may be required, for example in helping young people facing mental health challenges, but as libraries in Tromsø have shown, tailored services can have a major positive impact²⁸, including among refugee and migrant groups. Libraries have also shown their potential for innovation in helping people who are both LGBTQI and deaf maintain good sexual health²⁹.

Librarians of course do not just stay within the walls of their institution. In Nigeria, a librarian-researcher used contacts with local pastors to give talks just after mass in a number of churches, to a very positive reception. This sort of outreach can make a major difference in helping people to make the necessary changes to their lifestyles to avoid non-communicable diseases³⁰.

Conclusion

With the importance of health promotion ever more central to health policies, information – and libraries – are now a major factor of success in delivering SDG3. As the examples above set out, by supporting (and often even performing) research, by supporting the day-to-day work of health practitioners, and by giving individual citizens the information and help they need to live better, libraries can be a key part of the health infrastructure of any country.

As ever, the successful fulfilment of this role will depend on libraries themselves receiving the support and recognition necessary. There is also a need for constant efforts internally, for

²¹ Reardon et al (2015)

²² Önal (2014)

²³ Sabolovic-Krajina, *ibid*

²⁴ Reardon et al, *ibid*

²⁵ Tu-Keefner et al, *ibid*

²⁶ Sabolovic-Krajina, *ibid*

²⁷ Ghosh (2013)

²⁸ Berg Larsen (2015)

²⁹ Morris et al (2017)

³⁰ Nwafor-Orizu (2018)



example to ensure that libraries are best able to use all modern tools to give access to information³¹. Success in these promises, genuinely, to save lives.

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