

DEVELOPING CONTINUING PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT IN AFRICA

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Background new library expansion for journals

Introduction -Why

A series of questions from a librarian in Botswana, sent to Partnerships in Health Information (Phi) last year, brought into sharp focus the full extent of the changes that have taken place in the U.K. through the digitization of content and broadband technology. The speed with which this is happening in developed countries far outstrips any change that is currently taking place in most low-income countries where information, and particularly communication technology, is not yet capable of giving effective access to the internet either through lack of suitable bandwidth or cost. The cost of broadband access in Africa is several times higher than that in Europe and has to be set against very limited funding available to educational establishments and health facilities.

Partnerships in Health Information is concerned with capacity building for those involved in health information flow in a number of African countries. Through partnership links between libraries in the U.K. and partner countries endeavour to both facilitate professional development and raise the profile of the profession. Development of health librarianship in Africa is severely hindered by the lack of finance for library materials which in its turn, may lead to sidelining the library and, even worse, marginalising the expertise of librarians.

Situation and problem of CPD

Opportunities for professional development for African librarians are limited; hence the necessity to ensure that what is made available is what is wanted by them. The dilemma lies in knowing what new skills, resulting from technical change, are emerging as necessities, and then assessing their relevance to colleagues in an African context. We know that broadband is being made more available in Africa and that the “backbones” currently being laid down ought to make access considerably more affordable, but the timescale for such developments is unknown. It is difficult to keep new technological skills well honed if they cannot be practised; on the other hand we need to work with our librarian colleagues so that they are in at the ground floor when the whole sophisticated system suddenly bursts upon them.

What are the modern trends to take into account?

Electronic access and digital content – spatial changes

We can only speak of developments in the U.K. with any certainty, but library literature suggests that the same trends are taking place in developed countries all over the world. Printed books and periodicals are being replaced by electronic access to their digital equivalents. Stack upon stack of printed materials are relegated to a store or otherwise disposed of. In some commercial and research settings this trend has been taken even

further. Access to information is now from the office or laboratory; the library is drastically reduced and the space saved used for other purposes¹.

In educational establishments the need for some printed books and study places remains. But the study places have been joined by workstations and facilities for internet access from an individual's own computer. Thus the library as a space in an educational environment becomes a place for on-site, individual learning and research with help on hand either formally or informally. New buildings in Africa appear to be taking this into account at least in part. The Medical Training College in Nairobi (for clinical officers, nurses and professions allied to medicine) has a very large building with internet access points for 100 study places (but when we were there in 2006 no computers or connectivity).

Distance learning remote librarianship

In the U.K. technology has made distance learning a more viable proposition for educational institutions and their students. Much information access and use can now take place outside the library, using tools and guidance devised by librarians – even a virtual reference service to meet student needs. This will be a tremendous step forward in Africa, enabling more people to attain their educational goals in addition to having a potential impact on the ease with which continuing professional education can be pursued by doctors and nurses practising in isolated and rural areas.

Need for more people with more skills

Libraries and librarians in health facilities

A survey of the small, so called libraries in hospitals and other health facilities in Zambia² (a couple of shelves with mainly (very) old books) found that there was little if anything worth reading in them. It also ascertained that there were no librarians in the system surveyed, which covered four out of the nine provinces in the country. Phi's own data gathering activities suggest that the poor state of libraries in sub-Saharan Africa is likely to be similar, with few, if any, librarians to be found within government (and probably private) health facilities. Electronic access to information cannot come soon enough for those working in health facilities in isolated areas; but who will help overworked nurses and doctors to find reliable and relevant knowledge from the chaos that is the internet?

Size of profession – general v. specialization

There are very few professional health science librarians in the majority of African countries. Most of them are employed in the educational sector, universities and colleges with medical or health science faculties; some are to be found in major or national referral hospitals. The situation differs from country to country. Resource centre managers (mainly concerned with information on HIV/AIDS for the community), generally have no or minimal library training. Many of these people are isolated from their colleagues by distance and have a low profile in the organizational hierarchy. The profession needs to expand and to grasp the opportunities offered by technological change if librarians are not to be sidelined in the making of important policy decisions

Continuing professional development

What training opportunities are available?

Opportunities for in-house, continuing professional development are limited for most African librarians – increasing professional competence is achieved by undertaking higher degrees (a requirement for advancement in academic settings).

The Association for Health Information and Libraries in Africa (AHILA) provides pre-Congress workshops at their biennial Congresses; various international agencies run workshops for health professionals and librarians on different aspects of information literacy but their work is spread thinly over such a large continent. Partnerships in Health Information with its U.K. library partners works closely with the Tropical Health and Education Trust to fill in some of the gaps, by supporting African-led library projects with training opportunities through visits either to the U.K. or by sending out trainers/facilitators to the African partner when this is requested.

What are the training needs?

The questions from the librarian in Botswana caused us to consider the continuing professional development priorities as expressed by African partner librarians^{3 4} in relation to those elicited from U.K. librarians in a survey by Petrinic and Urquhart⁵, and from Orme⁶ who analysed the skills specified in advertisements for librarians and information science personnel⁷. The data are tabulated in tables 1-3. We make no pretence of this being a scientific survey, but the data accords with our experience and provide some pointers as to how library partnerships might go forward.

Discussion of data

Table (i)

Same or similar training requests from African and U.K. librarians

	AFRICAN HEALTH LIBRARIANS	U.K. HEALTH LIBRARIANS
	Training requested or needed	Training requested or required
1	Research methods for investigating users' information needs and preferences	Research methods and statistics
2	Marketing library services	Service promotion skills
3	Evidence based health care	Evidence based medicine
4	Identifying the evidence from different databases	Advanced search skills
5	Critical appraisal of research articles	Critical appraisal, systematic reviewing
6	Techniques for training others	Teaching skills

Several of the African requests are the same or similar to those of U.K. health librarians and represent training needs for both. Some African requests, such as 'marketing'(2) are more general than the U.K. equivalent; others such as 'research methods'(1) are different in that African librarians were referring to library and information research, whereas the U.K. librarians were seeking to understand the design and methodology of research done by health professionals.

Table (ii)

Training requested by African librarians but not mentioned by U.K. librarians

	AFRICAN HEALTH LIBRARIANS	NOT MENTIONED BY U.K. LIBRARIANS
	Training requested / support needed	Action required
1	Trends in information transfer	information
2	Protocol for the identification of reliable websites and information sources	information
3	Advocacy: raising the profile of health information as an essential pre-requisite to health	discussion & support
4	Database of health research done in or about the country	discussion & support
5	Library skills for library and resource centre assistants	discussion & support
6	Professional networking	discussion & support
7	Collection development – and development of a template suitable for local application	support & training
9	Use of WIN-ISIS for <i>African Index Medicus</i>	training
10	Writing for publication and other purposes e.g. proposal writing, repackaging information for different audiences	training
11	Information technology general & specific	training
12	Copyright	training

Many of these requests have no parallel in the U.K. where responsibility may lie somewhere within the library and information community, but is not part of the everyday duties of the majority of health librarians e.g. creation of a national database of health research (4), library skills for [health] library assistants (5), and devising a collection development template for local application (7). ‘Professional networking’ (6) in the African context means networking at a national level; it is not the equivalent of ‘team working skills’ often required by employers, but the ideas and techniques have much in common, so that a training element might usefully be included in discussion. Similarly, training in collection development might be necessary, but the creation of a ‘template for training of library assistants’ (probably in otherwise unsupervised resource centres) requires support and discussion with peers rather than training.

Training *per se* would be relevant to requests 9-12, but is not a solution to finding out about ‘trends in information transfer’ (1) or ‘protocols for the identification of reliable websites’ (2). These are matters of sharing information and distributing it amongst African health librarians. Literature on trends is already available to libraries in low-income countries through HINARI and similar initiatives. But it is not widely accessible; some of the journals we have found most useful, such as CILIP Update⁸, are not available through these programmes, and even when they are accessible, the tools to identify literature that might be (or even partially) relevant to African libraries is scarce.

Table (iii).

Training requested by U.K. librarians and required by employers but not mentioned by African librarians, and specialist roles required by employers identified as needs by African librarians.

- Items not in italic are from the paper by Petrinic and Urquhart⁹ additional skills considered desirable by survey of U.K. health librarians.
- Items in italic have been selected from the more specific items of employer requirements.¹⁰

	AFRICAN HEALTH LIBRARIANS¹¹	U.K. HEALTH LIBRARIANS¹²
	Training requested or needed	Training requested or required
1		Subject knowledge
2		Project management
3		<i>Strategic planning</i>
4		<i>Performance management</i>
5		<i>Change management</i>
6		<i>Negotiating skills</i>
7	Factors to take into account in automating library routines	<i>Library management systems skills</i>
8	Website design creation of portals and gateways	<i>Website design & development skills</i>

Numbers 1-6 are management techniques which have not been identified as training needs by our African colleagues. On the other hand ‘Library management systems skills’ (7) and ‘website design and development’ (8) are skills which employers are entitled to assume are present in the library and information community in the U.K., but are not widespread in Africa. Certainly training is needed, but the African request for ‘factors to take into account in automating library routines’ is more of a request for information and support. Even moderate sized health libraries, are still using card and paper based systems.

Conclusions

Information literacy is recognized as important for the development of a modern economy in low income countries¹³. African countries will undoubtedly require different or modified solutions to information overload from those created in developed countries, whose solutions may not prove transferable. While we have no doubt that our African colleagues are fully capable of coming to grips with the situation, it is nevertheless an issue that whereas this step-change in content acquisition and delivery has taken place over a decade or so in developed countries; e-books, digital repositories, webs 1 and 2, blogs, and wikis will arrive 'fully fledged' when broadband access becomes more available in African countries.

Even if the digital divide is bridged by technology and improved communications, the gulf represented by the capacity and the manpower needed to exploit it could take some time to fill. Since professional librarian posts are few and health information specialists even fewer, the effectiveness of any expansion of posts into the health system cannot be maximised unless the librarians concerned are able to develop the skills they need. We know that once formal education has finished, opportunities for in-service, professional development in the health information field is at best sporadic. Workshops on various aspects of information literacy, research and evidence based health care are often run for health professionals and librarians together. This may disadvantage librarians if the focus strays into areas which have not traditionally been in their domain and where they may feel they have no part to play.

Our investigations, which look to the future, indicate that there are a number of training requirements in addition to those that African colleagues have already articulated, which might usefully be incorporated into library partnership projects. As far as we know this training is not currently available to African librarians, even though the knowledge may exist within their home country. On the other hand some of the requests which emerged require support and facilitation, rather than training, especially where policy and an intimate knowledge of the country is required.

We strongly believe as a profession we must all work together with our African colleagues and take the necessary steps to ensure the continuity and sustainability of continuing professional development, especially as it relates to health. Chapters of the Association for Health Information and Libraries exist in a number of African countries – some active and some at early stages of development or even struggling. We have found good support for the idea that Phi supported partnerships should endeavour to benefit the whole country rather than a single institution. Working with and through local associations can help in achieving this wider goal. The difficulties should not be underestimated. Librarians are thin on the ground and the costs of travel and communication are a significant burden on low salaries. Nevertheless such associations can form a focus to harness not just their own expertise and experience, but that of outside agencies and other professions within their country to meet the health information needs of all those working towards the Millennium Development Goals.

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- ¹ Aerospace and Defence Librarians Group. Prepare your case for survival now. *Update*. Nov. 2007; 6:5.
- ² Hoppenbrouwer, J. & Kanyengo, C.W.. Current access to health information in Zambia of selected health institutions. *Journal of Health Information and Libraries* 2007; 24(4):246-256.
- ³ Shaw, J.G & Newman J. A preliminary assessment of health information services and needs in Kenya: report of a visit to Nairobi, Kenya, 11th -19th March, 2006. *Partnerships in Health Information*, 2006. p.29, appendices.
- ⁴ Shaw, J.G.& Godbolt, S. Issues in achieving information for all in Zambia: report of a visit 10th-19th January, 2008. *Partnerships in Health Information*, 2008. p.19, appendices
- ⁵ Petrinic, T. & Urquhart, C. The education and training needs of health librarians – the generalist versus specialist dilemma. *Health Information and Libraries Journal*. 2007; 24(3):167-176.
- ⁶ Orme, V. What skills and qualities are employers seeking? *Update*. Mar. 2008; 7(3):31-33.
- ⁷ Orme, V. What skills and qualities are employers seeking? *Update*. Mar. 2008; 7(3):31-33.
- ⁸ *Update*. Published by the Chartered Institute of Librarians and Information Professionals, U.K.
- ⁹ Petrinic, T. & Urquhart, C. The education and training needs of health librarians – the generalist versus specialist dilemma. *Health Information and Libraries Journal*. 2007; **24**:167-176.
- ¹⁰ Orme, V. What skills and qualities are employers seeking? *Update*. Mar. 2008; **7**(3):31-33.
- ¹¹ AHILA Workshop Proposal to humanitarian Fund. 2008.
- ¹² Workshops
- ¹³ Milne, C. & Lloyd I. Information literacy: continuing the journey. *Link: connecting Commonwealth librarians*. Dec. 2007; (2):6-7.