

## **LIBRARIES AS A MEETING PLACE FOR HEALTH PROMOTION: THE EXPERIENCE OF A COLLABORATION WITH THE ITALIAN AIDS HELP LINE**

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### **Introduction**

Libraries are generally considered as a place where to look for information in different forms and supports: books, journals, newspapers, and - more recently – audiovisual, electronic and digital resources. They also offer many other opportunities to share knowledge by establishing useful direct contacts between information producers and final users. In this way, libraries may also become a preferred meeting place to host workshops or conferences in specific fields, such as public health, and get satisfactory results in terms of information sharing between different user groups by engaging experts from different backgrounds.

The direct contact between information producers - experts in the field - and users can be very useful and provide extraordinary results both in terms of information sharing and human relationships; in fact, the creation of informal situations to disseminate knowledge proves to be much more effective than the formal ones, especially when health-related issues are concerned. In this way, people of different ages are more inclined to speak; questions are asked, answers are given, according to specific needs and also non verbal communication plays an important role to permit to understand what is hidden behind a question that is only partially asked or even only thought of.

Listening to experts speaking is generally more influential and emotionally involving than silent reading in a library, at school or at home. Once a basic background on a specific health issue is acquired, and useful points for reflections are developed together with recognised information requirements, books, journals and other information sources, including online information, will be searched for and read with a different and more conscious approach. In this way libraries will get the double role of active promoting information sharing as well as providing information through different supports.

The experience of a new area of collaboration between researchers in health sciences and librarians of different sectors is reported as a means to promote a further role for libraries and librarians as primary actors in health prevention and promotion and, more generally, in the Public Understanding of Science (PUS).

This paper reports a positive teamwork involving direct communication with library users and experts in health related matters and offers hints to organize similar initiatives in other countries. Provisional results, based on data gathered by a questionnaire, are also reported here in order to underline the interest and the need for health information.

## **Health promotion at the library**

The collaboration is based on the idea that scientists of a research institute can be usefully involved in more or less formal events organized with and within a library and provide important information for health promotion and prevention. Within this framework, scientific information and data can be developed in the form of messages that the general public can more easily understand.

The pilot experience was developed within the university framework since it was considered the best context to start a sound and qualified involvement of librarians, students and teachers who, in turn, would replicate such experience in different contexts.

The main actors of this experience are:

- on the one hand, the experts of the Istituto Superiore di Sanità (ISS, the National Institute of Health in Italy) working in different sectors for the promotion of public health,
- on the other, some libraries of different types (university, school, local area, etc.) that are particularly sensitive and available to share new experiences.

Meetings organized within a library also provide a good opportunity to spread leaflets and other non book health related material produced by the research institutions which do not often reach the library and its users.

Such useful resources (power point presentations, posters, leaflets, audiovisual and digital documentation) mainly addressed to the general public and schools, may also be included in the library website, thus increasing the amount of selected quality information to be exploited by all library users.

## **The Istituto Superiore di Sanità**

The Istituto Superiore di Sanità is the leading technical and scientific body of the National Health Service in Italy (SSN). It represents a good example of a public body to be involved in libraries initiatives for the promotion of public health.

Its activities include research, clinical trials, advise, control and training in public health. It collaborates with the authorities responsible for the design and implementation of public health programmes at local and national level and plays a leading role in several major international research projects. It collaborates with major European public and private health institutions and has significant collaborations with international scientific and healthcare associations.

The ISS research covers all area of public health fields with specific excellence, among others, in: cancer, cancer stem cells, AIDS and poverty-related diseases, infectious diseases, drugs, vaccines, food products, immunotherapies, neurosciences, environment, rare diseases, biomedical technologies. Researchers study all diseases that affect human population and animals, test new drugs and vaccines, develop highly advanced research technologies, control food safety, evaluate toxicity of chemical substances in the environment, are on the front line in case of health emergencies and natural calamities. It also monitors trends in diseases, mortality and other health factors, and carries on health-related environmental surveys and investigations of epidemics. ISS plans, develops and organizes training activities in a wide variety of areas and develops and tests innovative training methods. It also organizes congresses, conferences, workshops and seminars on public health issues.

Finally, ISS plans, implements and evaluates international public health projects, ranging from cooperative research and development projects to humanitarian assistance. It actively promotes cooperation at three different levels: scientific partnerships with industrialised countries, scientific

and development projects in partnership with economies in transition, development partnerships in Africa and in countries suffering natural emergencies or war situations.

ISS is a major source of information relating to public health and biomedicine through online connections to scientific databases but overall through its numerous publications. Its researchers publish about 1800 articles per year in national and international journals and books. The digital archive DSpace ISS (<http://dspace.iss.it>) contains all publications by ISS researchers.

Its Publishing Unit is responsible for the Institute's editorial activities: production and dissemination of ISS publications; management and development of the DSpace database; promotion of the Institute's image through participation in public events (national and international fairs and exhibitions) and production of advertising material; institutional activity reports; realization of photographic, graphic and multimedia material.

### **AIDS Help line speaking in a library, as starters of the project.**

The section describes the collaboration between the experts in psycho-socio-behavioural sciences of the ISS "Italian AIDS Help Line" Unit, taking part in this experience as the starters of the initiative) and the experts in communication, education and library sciences (ISS Publishing Unit and University "Roma Tre" of Rome, Faculty of Education).

### ***Operational Unit "Telefono Verde AIDS", Department of infectious, parasitic and immune-mediated diseases***

The workshop "Accesso libero. Perchè nessuno resti escluso" ("Free access. Nobody left behind") that was held in May 2007, represents the first official step to the newly established collaboration between different entities and knowledge repositories: universities, schools, research institutes, libraries and documentation centers. Within this collaboration an *ad hoc* path was defined, aimed at increasing the dissemination of scientific knowledge on HIV infection and AIDS. This has been achieved through the development of new communication channels directed to the general public attending libraries and universities.

The Unit "Telefono Verde AIDS" (<http://www.iss.it/tele/cont.php?id=76&lang=1&tipo=35>) AIDS Help Line, is a structure made of psychologists, cultural-linguistic mediators and technical staff. Since 1987 this structure has been carrying on psycho-social-behavioral research, phone counselling, training and advising activities, and has been standing out as a relevant national and international reference point.

Researchers working in this Unit focus their attention on the following needs:

- turn the results of studies and investigations into messages suitable for the population at large; produce messages able to develop behaviors and lifestyles useful to health promotion and improvement of quality of life;
- promote and disseminate knowledge and skills on issues related to effective communication and counselling through *intra* and *extra moenia* training programmes addressed to professionals from the National Health Service (SSN – Servizio Sanitario Nazionale), non-governmental Organizations (NGO) and volunteer Associations;
- propose, coordinate and carry out national and international projects within research fields related to psycho-social and behavioral aspects of specific targets, included young people, foreign citizens and subjects affected by HIV;
- create national networks to evaluate, test, compare and implement effective prevention strategies in relation to HIV infection.

All skills and experience acquired in these areas allowed the Unit to collaborate in the initiative “Free access. No one is left behind” applying the counselling methodology in a different framework. The WHO defined this approach as “a confidential dialogue, an interaction between an operator and an individual aimed at activating his/her inner resources to face stressful situations and make autonomously decisions in relation to HIV infection and AIDS” [World Health Organization-Global Programme on AIDS (WHO/GPA). Counselling for HIV/AIDS: a key to caring. Geneva:1995].

This type of highly specialized intervention represented the reference frame to reach the following objectives:

- make the person/user aware and responsible of his/her own health
- reinforce the empowerment of the person/user
- make the community aware of health issues which are often considered as a prerogative of specific targets and not of the population at large.

The same professional skills were applied for the creation of informative brochures, leaflets and bookmarks on the HIV infection and on AIDS which were produced in Italian, English, French, Spanish, Russian, Romanian, Arabic and Chinese.

These editorial products were realized by professionals in publishing activities and were highly appreciated during events, and by training-educational institutes, schools, universities, as well as by other local information services (libraries). They were also distributed in different exhibitions and other public events.

The fulfillment of this path required a collaboration between government structures and research bodies with the common purpose of identifying preventive ways and strategies directed to the general public; it has been the demonstration of how it is useful to integrate different knowledge and skills, to compare different disciplines and take action and act in different directions. In conclusion, this path can represent a new and significant experience also in respect to other health issues still to be implemented at national level.

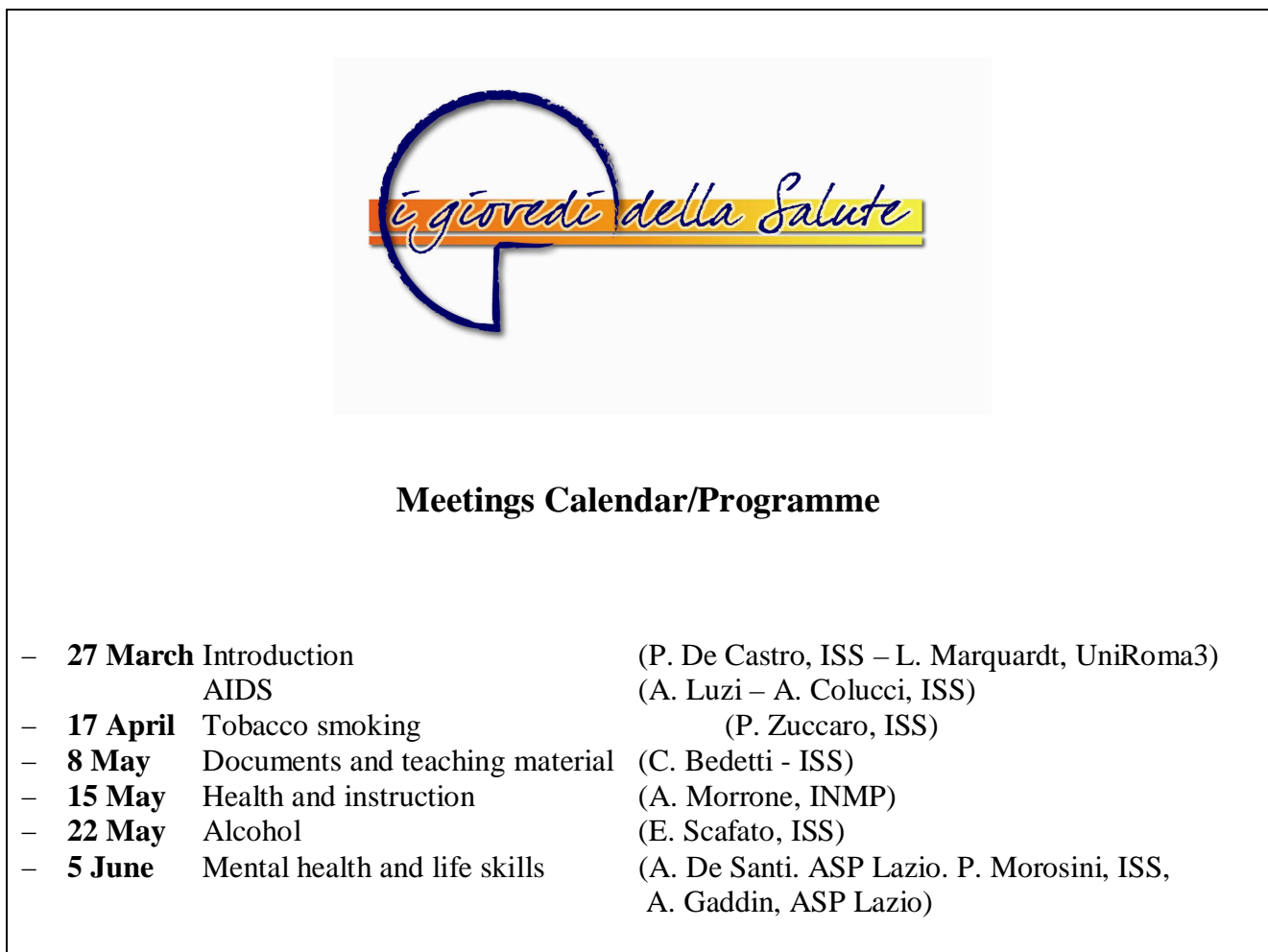
### **“I giovedì della salute” (“Thursdays for health”)**

After the success of that first initiative, a series of meetings has been organized in collaboration between the ISS Publishing Unit and the “Roma Tre” University on health-related themes and health prevention and promotion. The meetings aim at providing the audience with essential and expert knowledge. They are called “I giovedì della salute” (“Thursdays for health”) with the hope that the choice of a specific weekday could contribute to better disseminate information about this initiative. The meetings are addressed to students in education sciences, health and school professionals (teachers, librarians, information specialists) and cultural mediators. They all should be able to enhance understanding, share information, and create a relationship that from the school-university-research institute collaborative team reaches families and citizens. This educational path could help everyone making informed decisions about his/her own health and that of the community as well.

Emphasis is put on problems that can occur to young people, such as HIV-infection, alcohol and tobacco use and addiction, and those which may affect their behaviour, life skills and mental health. Educational materials produced by the ISS are also presented: in the last years ISS has organized short courses on specific topics - such as new drugs, biotechnology in medicine, microbiology, chemical substances toxicology and animal welfare - by using active and cooperative learning

methods. Following each training session, ISS publishes a set of educational materials including researchers' contributions and students/teachers experiences at school. The series is called "Publications for schools" and is available online at the ISS website ([www.iss.it](http://www.iss.it)).

This session of meetings will be concluded in June 2008 (Figure 1 reports the Meeting Calendar and Programme), and a new session will begin in Autumn. The next schedule for meeting days, times and issues is presently under discussion. It will also be agreed upon experiences and comments received by the participants of the first meetings.



**Figure 1.** Meeting Calendar and Program of the First Session of the “I giovedì della salute”

### Survey of participants' attitudes

In order to plan the next edition of meetings, participants' interests and needs have been investigated. The attendants of the “pilot edition” were invited to fill in a questionnaire. Data are collected during every meeting because there may be some new participants for any event.

Figure 2 shows a moment of the Workshop on AIDS, opening the first cycle of the “I giovedì della Salute” on March 27 2008.



**Figure 2.** Workshop on AIDS, Rome, March 27 2008.  
Anna Luzi and Anna Colucci standing in front of the audience.

The following figures are based on data from a little group of 12 respondents: although the number is limited, the answers help to understand health information needs.

They are all women of an average age of 34 years (ranging from 21 up to 56); 10 are students (6 of them are also school teachers). None is involved in any health projects at the moment.

The knowledge of foreign languages is useful to access multilingual information. English language level varies from little (4), well enough (4) and very well known (1); French (4) and Spanish (2) are also known. Computer skills are also necessary to search and retrieve information: respondents declare to have good (9) or scarce (2) skills; 1 NA (No answer).

It is interesting to see that 10 out of 12 would like the first meeting (about AIDS) to be replied; 5 have already taken part in it. Here follow some interesting data.

### ***Motivation for attendance***

The respondents say that they wish to attend “this and further meetings” for the following reasons:

- getting a deeper knowledge on health issues (3)
- a great interest (6), 1 of these respondents “both for personal and professional interest”
- the importance of being informed (2)
- the success and stimuli of the first meeting (1).

### ***Expectations***

Participants would expect to

- learn new things (3),
- get more awareness about how to face health problems as a teacher and an educator (1);
- to be more prepared after the meeting (1),
- to get informed (1); to get informed about prevention (1);
- to get clarification and deep information (1);
- to increase my knowledge (1); 3 NA.

### Attitudes

The respondents, when facing a health problem or making a decision in the medical field, declare to feel rather:

- bewildered due to lack of field knowledge
- uncertain and in search of documentation: “I would like to know more”
- incompetent: “there isn’t enough information or I don’t know it”
- inadequate: “I don’t think I have the adequate means”
- unprepared and inadequate
- little informed
- confused due to muddled and conflicting information
- unprepared: “my knowledge is more and more insufficient as for the different situation of physical destabilization”
- unprepared due to uncertainty in procedures
- bewildered due to conflicting opinions.

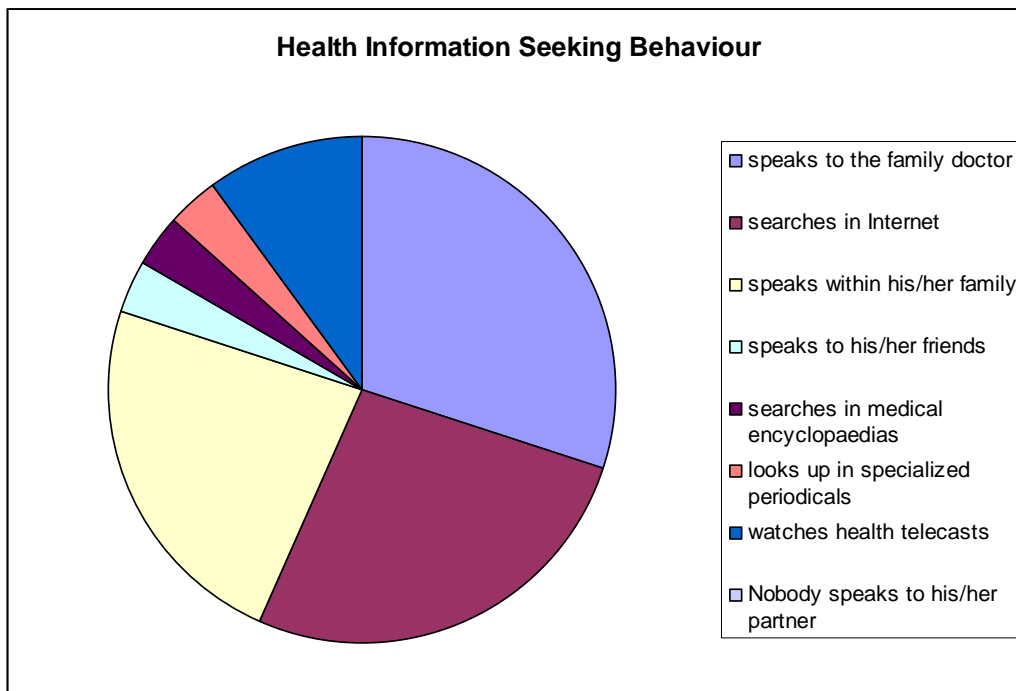
Only in two cases the respondent feels “comfortable: I trust medical research” and “serene: I feel I’m able to face it through information”.

### Health Information Seeking Behaviour

When seeking health information or dealing with a health problem, the respondent

- speaks to the family doctor (9),
- searches in Internet (8), using as search engine Google (8) and Virgilio (1), or visiting specific websites<sup>1</sup> (1)
- speaks to members of his/her family (7); speaks to his/her friends (1)
- searches in medical encyclopaedias (1)
- looks up in specialized periodicals<sup>2</sup> (1)
- watches health telecasts<sup>3</sup> (3).

Nobody speaks to his/her partner. Figure 3 shows these data.



**Figure 3.** Answers received as regards health information seeking behaviour.

<sup>1</sup> The respondent doesn't specify which sites.

<sup>2</sup> Not specified.

<sup>3</sup> Programmes are specified.

### ***Difficulties in searching for health information***

The respondents have found some difficulties when searching for health information:

- lack of understanding medical terms (1), too specific (2) or technical (1) terms
- too general information or specific but not deep information
- conflicting and confused information
- much inaccuracy
- uncertainty about information reliability.

Three of them say that they found no difficulty: one specifies that the Internet and medical doctor clarification helped her; another one says that she seldom searched for information, but in that case the Internet helped her.

### ***Interest in health issues***

Respondents' interest in health issues is mainly due to personal (8), family (1) and professional (4) reasons.

They would like that future meetings may regard:

- cancer, as a widespread disease
- nutrition
- sexually transmitted diseases
- children's diseases, including behaviour and learning difficulties
- environmental pollution.

### ***Opinions***

The participants' opinions about AIDS and tobacco smoke were asked before the related meetings.

#### ***AIDS***

It is considered a disease that should not be underestimated (5); suitable therapies can take it under control (2); no hope (1), it's a problem but it can be highly reduced with good information on prevention. Nobody thinks "it can be caught at the hospital during blood transfusion" or "it is no more a problem".

Some of them would like:

- to know how AIDS passes from an individual to another one
- to get a wider information to be spread because there's been a silence about that disease for a long time
- it should be deeply discussed at school.

#### ***Tobacco smoking***

It is considered an addiction not to be underestimated (8); it is increasing among youngsters (6); it is hard to recover from it (2); it's a problem of intolerance (1) or arrogance (1); it is a not faced problem due to market reason. Nobody thinks "it's no more a problem". Furthermore, the remaining participants say that they would like to know if:

- there are effective methods for interrupting smoking;
- passive smoking causes long term damages;
- current medications work
- which behaviour is to be adopted in order to discourage from smoking.

### ***Health education and libraries***

The relationship between health education and libraries/information centres is also considered.

Two respondents say that libraries/information centres might play a meaningful role and one of them specifies “because many people could search for health information through them” and another one “because they’re authoritative voices, distributed in the country”. One says that “they play a meaningful role which affects the community”.

Most of respondents think that libraries might play (5) or play (3) a supportive role and one of them specifies “as they are knowledge and social places”. A respondent says that “they play no role at all”.

Finally, 7 respondents leave their e-mail address for further contacts.

Of course, the above described data do not come from a statistical sample. Anyway they offer the possibility to reflect about the need for good and selected information about health issues. The lack of information or not reliable information causes uncertainty and confusion. In the meantime, the interest in health field is high for many reasons and libraries and information centres should play a more relevant and proactive role.

### **Final remarks**

We have described a positive pilot experience of collaboration among libraries, schools, universities and experts in health related issues stressing the necessity to build bridges and fill gaps in information needs from users who do not generally approach such issues but have a generalised unexpressed need to be informed. The results of these experience spur us to go on in this direction: feedback received by meeting attendants is very positive and the initiative is also highly appreciated by the managerial staff of all institutions involved.

Training cycles will be developed in other sectors, more structured evaluation tools will be implemented to compare data; new issues will be included in the program and communication improved also through refined strategies and the production of *ad hoc* documents, specific flyers and online tools.

Last, but not least, this positive experience further stresses the active role of libraries and librarians as information brokers and promoters, able to take initiatives, be proactive in identifying information needs, join people together, provide quality speakers, useful documentation material and support actions for any perceived information need for the sake of our health.

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