

## Healthy Connections Health Science and Public Libraries in Small Communities

By **Norma Graham**

I have had the pleasure of working in a small rural public library for the past nine years. Recently, as part of a course, I had the opportunity to work in a health sciences library in a nearby urban centre. During my time at the library, and in conversation with my supervisor there, I came to some realizations about the challenges of disseminating consumer health information in rural areas. I also saw that there are some good opportunities for public and health science libraries to work together to overcome these challenges.

In small communities there are barriers to access to consumer health information that have nothing to do with availability. When library staff are known by users not only as information workers, but also as friends or neighbours, there can be reluctance on the part of users to ask for information on a subject that patrons may well regard as being intensely personal. A man in his 70s who's just been diagnosed with prostate cancer may be unwilling to ask at the library for information due to concern that news of his illness may be all over town within a few days. A woman with recurrent urinary tract infections may feel uncomfortable talking to others about it, including her local librarian. But patients who are not comfortable with the internet, or who aren't aware of how to effectively search for information or support, need our help. How do we overcome this barrier of familiarity to get them the assistance they need?

First, we need the skills. A library's staff needs to ensure that they can conduct an effective and discreet reference interview, and then quickly obtain the relevant information for patrons. Every public library should have at the ready a list of reliable sources of health information. Anyone who works in either health sciences or public libraries knows that the assistance of professional information workers is still needed to help consumers sift through the reams of healthcare information to find what is relevant. There is no shortage of consumer health information available. The challenge is to conduct effective searches so that the user is not overwhelmed with a barrage of data, and to separate the reliable resources from the questionable ones. Just as we need to ensure that the medical books on our shelves are up-to-date, reliable sources of health information, so we need to ensure that online information we recommend to patrons or print out is from trusted sources. Public libraries looking to create a list of reliable sources for health information should contact their nearest health sciences library for advice.

Also, health sciences libraries have subscriptions to numerous online medical journals and databases, some of which will be accessible only to hospital staff, but many of which can be viewed for free, such as PubMed. If a public library has a patron who requires this level of information, connecting with the nearest health sciences library can quickly get them the help they need.

Secondly, we need to promote the service. People in small and rural communities, especially people who have not been recent library users, may be unaware of the resources available specifically for healthcare consumers. There are many ways in which public and health sciences libraries can market this service to the public, such as news releases, posters, presentations to church groups, service clubs and seniors groups, flyers in doctors' offices, and word of mouth.

Thirdly, as part of this promotion, we need to let library users know that we have a confidentiality policy that precludes us from discussing their library use with others. Information workers in health sciences libraries in hospitals have signed a statement that they will keep knowledge of patients' health matters private and confidential. Public libraries in Ontario are governed by the Municipal Freedom of Information and Privacy Act. People in rural and remote areas may be a long way from a hospital with a library: if this is the case, they should feel comfortable and confident in asking for help at their public library, knowing their privacy is protected.

The most important lesson I learned during my time at the health sciences library was this: by working together, public and health sciences libraries in communities of all sizes can help individuals facing difficult health issues to participate actively in their care and to make informed choices.

For details about public libraries and privacy, please see the information sheet from the office of the Information and Privacy Commissioner at

[www.ipc.on.ca/images/Resources/library-e.pdf](http://www.ipc.on.ca/images/Resources/library-e.pdf).

For a list of hospital libraries in Southwestern Ontario, see [www.wohkn.ca/about.htm](http://www.wohkn.ca/about.htm).

### **Norma Graham**

is the branch head of the Kimberley branch of the Grey Highlands Public Library.  
[kimberleylibrary@cablerocket.com](mailto:kimberleylibrary@cablerocket.com)