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Health Professionals Perception of the Library Services In Three Health Sciences Institutions in Lagos

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ABSTRACT

A survey was conducted to obtain data related to health professionals' image of the Librarians. Physicians, Residents, Nurses, Medical Students, Dentists, Pharmacists, Physiotherapist, Basic Medical Scientists and Community Health Workers were questioned about their experiences with and opinions of Librarians. Particular emphasis was made on the skills and characteristics needed by helpful and successful Librarians. Good communication was ranked as the most important skill for the Librarian. Subject expertise was ranked second by health professionals. The Librarian is approachable, responsive, supportive and open to change. They reported receiving accurate and reliable information from Librarians. However, they didn't always regard the information as the most updated and therefore it was not always timely in the global context.

INTRODUCTION

The image of the Librarian has a direct impact on her professional well being. While in the past doing a good job may have been enough to ensure a continued employment, Librarians now need to market themselves actively to prove in terms important to management that they are invaluable to their institution. The image of a Librarian depends largely on how the Librarian is perceived. Image has been of concern to the Librarian over the years, however, it has never been more important than now, more especially in the Nigerian situation where many students entering the higher institution may never have set foot in a library or ever learned how to use the library and its facilities. Nevertheless, the library being the nerve centre of academic activities especially in the Health Sciences Institution, both students and staff really have no choice other than to master the use of its facilities with a view to enhancing their knowledge in the various disciplines as well as improving their teaching and research prowess.

Consequently, a study was undertaken to examine the nature of interaction between the Librarians and the Health Sciences professionals, their perception of Librarians, as well as the Librarians' self image.

Professional identity determines the image projected to clients. Since all professionals have some concern about their professional image, Librarians in today's information society have an opportunity to promote themselves as disseminators of information and information consultant in addition to being guardians of books and journals as well as experts in bibliographic searches. Librarians cannot market themselves as key components of the information age, if they do not see themselves as such. While stereotypes portrayed them as helpful and educated, they also described them as old fashion, introverted and full of rules. The public and health professionals especially are

increasingly asking for sophisticated information technologies and they may turn to Librarians for assistance with these advanced tools. This study attempts to assess and report on the health professional perception of Librarians and to compare it with the self image of the health sciences Librarian in the process of their constant interaction in the three health institutions under study.

Literature Review

The issue of the librarians image cuts across international boundaries. A re-occurring theme in the literature on this subject is the value of image.

In 1988, the Special Libraries Association (SLA) in the United States formed a special task force to determine how librarians viewed themselves, and also explored ways their perceptions should and might be changed. Their overall impression were that Librarians were positively oriented people who are always willing to provide services to patrons. This same study found out that Librarians themselves felt their roles were challenging and fulfilling and that the work they did was valued by society.

Blackwelder. M.B. (1962)² also reported that health sciences professionals in the U.S attested to receiving accurate, reliable and timely information from Librarians.

In the Carribbeans and Central America, medical libraries often fall short of meeting information needs because of the slow development of health sciences libraries and under-utilization of health information which is a result of a cultural tradition which places low value on libraries. Hence according to Dee (1992)³ information delivery problems to health sciences professionals stem from difficult economic, social, and political conditions.

In Africa Lor (1996)⁴ notes undue dependence on foreign source of information and inadequate contact with library during primary and post primary school years as a regular characteristics of most libraries. This has the effect of making most users view the library with suspicion and a little fear. As a result the library staff are saddled with additional job of teaching most users. The library is usually poorly funded. Even with the 10% of the University revolving funds given to the University Libraries by the National Universities Commission the situation has not changed much.

In Nigeria Adimorah (1993)⁵ confirmed this through his study on scientists and technologists who reported that Librarians were not able to meet their information needs because of Non-availability of current journals, lack of databases, and good information storage and retrieval systems. He also noted the lack of inter-library loan facilities, inadequate and stale information sources in Nigeria. Poor education of library and information centre staff to responsive services also constituted a militating factor.

However, despite this myriad of problems the medical

librarians more than other librarians appreciate the Medical professionals needs for concise and up to date information, in the areas of research and health management.

METHODS

To determine how different groups of health professionals perceive Librarians and the work of Librarians, a survey of physicians, residents, Medical students, Nurses Dentists, Pharmacists, Physiotherapists and Basic Medical Scientists was conducted in the state of Lagos in Nigeria. A second survey of all members of Medical Libraries was conducted to assess how they felt they were perceived by health professionals using the following centres: University of Lagos Medical Library, Central Medical Library, Yaba and Nigerian Institute of Medical Research Library, Yaba.

The survey questionnaires for both the health professionals and the Librarians were adopted from a similar study done by Blackwelder, *et. al.* in the US⁶.

The questionnaires were personally administered by the researchers over a period of 3 months. Systematic ran-

dom samples were drawn for each health professional group. As follows: Medical students 150 (37%), Physician 50 (12%), 50 Residents (12%), 50 Nurses (12%), 20 Student nurses (4.9%), 30 Dentists (7.3%), 30 Pharmacists (7.3%), 10 Physiotherapist (2.5%), 10 Basic Medical Scientists (2.5%) and 10 Psychiatrists (2.5%). Out of 410 questionnaires sent out, 247 or 60.2% were returned as follows: out of 150 Medical Students (123 returned), 50 Physicians (31 returned), 50 Residents (24 returned), 20 Nurses (11 returned), 20 Students Nurses (17 returned), 20 Dentists (13 returned), 30 Pharmacists (15 returned), 10 Physiotherapists (3 returned), 10 Basic Medical Scientists (6 returned), 10 Psychiatrists (4 returned).

Twenty-seven Medical librarians with at least a Diploma in Librarianship in the three institutions were questioned with the return rate of 19(70.3%) which is slightly higher than those of the health professionals.

The resulting sample of health professionals also revealed that 155 were females, while 132 were males.

Table I

	Comprehensive information	Basic information	On-line search	Hardware questions	Software questions	Telecommunication question	Internet questions	Identifying the best article in book	Defining/clarifying a specific information need
Students	90	119	20	7	0	70	12	54	69
Physicians	24	27	20	5	3	5	13	1	12
Residents	19	20	21	-	2	10	5	2	13
Nurses/Students	16	15	5	-	-	9	-	-	5
Dentist	9	8	9	-	-	7	-	1	3
Pharmacist	7	8	5	1	-	7	-	1	1
Physiotherapist	1	3	1	-	-	2	-	-	-
Basic Medical Scientist	5	4	5	-	-	3	-	-	-
Psychiartrist	1	3	-	-	-	1	-	-	1
All	172	207	86	13	5	144	30	59	104

Table II
Satisfaction with Service

	n = 247 Health professionals				n = 19 Librarians			
	Excellent	Good	Satisfactory	Unsatisfactory	Excellent	Good	Satisfactory	Unsatisfactory
Accuracy	44(17.8%)	100(40.5%)	61(24.7%)	40(16.2%)	7(36.8%)	2(10.5%)	-	-
Reliability	10(4.1%)	90(36.4%)	101(40.8%)	46(18.6)	2(10.5%)	11(57.8%)	7(36.8%)	-
Timeliness	15(6.1%)	97(39.2%)	116(46.9%)	11(4.5%)	15(78.9%)	2(10.5%)	1(5.3%)	-
Usefulness	95(38.5%)	119(48.2%)	12(4.8%)	8(3.2%)	17(78.9%)	2(10.5%)	-	-
Valuable	60(24.3%)	129(52.2%)	25(10.1%)	28(11.3%)	11(57.8%)	5(26.3%)	1(5.3%)	-

* not all respondents answered all questions

Table III

Work-related Characteristics of Librarians:
Comparison of faculty and Librarians responses

	All Health Professionals n = 247	Librarians n = 19
People Oriented	210 (85.0%)	19 (100%)
Career Oriented	86 (34.8%)	12 (63.3%)
Service Oriented	202 (81.7%)	16 (84.2%)
Task Oriented	92 (37.2%)	16 (84.2%)
Job Oriented	80 (32.3%)	14 (73.7%)
Money Oriented	98 (36.0%)	1 (5.3%)

Table II

Perception of skills needed by Successful Librarian

Skills	Health Professionals			Health Sciences Librarians		
	no	%	rank	no	%	rank
1. Commu- nication	178	72.0	1	19	94.7	1
2. Computer/ technology	123	49.7	2	10	52.6	5
3. Subject expertise	106	42.9	3	8	42.6	7
4. Research expertise	101	40.8	4	13	68.4	4
5. Interper- sonal	54	21.8	5	17	89.4	2
6. Analytical	27	10.9	6	11	47.3	6
7. Teaching	22	8.9	7	9	87.8	3
8. Date base design	1	0.9	8	0	0	9
9. Financial management			9	1	5.2	8

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

Majority of the respondents had at least used a health sciences library 213 (86.2%). These health professionals used the library for information related to professional work activities 215 (87.7%) or educational and courses related activities 197 (79.1%). One hundred and forty-four (58.2%) health professional used it for recreational reading.

Sources of Information

The first source of information was colleagues 186 (75.3%), 93 (37.6%) used personal files, and 89 (36.0%) used the libraries.

The Librarians apparently aware of this behaviour of the health professionals towards their services 12 (63.1%) of the Librarians said they would usually go to their colleagues first while 7 (36.8) said they would go to the library.

Information Needs of Health Professionals

The respondents were asked how often they went to the Librarian to obtain various kinds of information. Such information include (1) Comprehensive information on a subject (3) assistance with on-line literature, (4) hardware questions or problems, (5) software questions and problems, (6) internet questions, (7) help in identifying and clar-

ifying a specific information need. The view of the Health Sciences Librarians were also sought on how often they felt the health professional used the Librarians to meet these information needs.

Physicians and Residents used Librarians for assistance with basic information more than any kind of help. The students went to the Librarian more than any other group of health professionals for basic information. This is in variation to the findings of Blackwelder and Dimitroff in U.S.A who observed that students were most interested in information relating to on-line Search. This seems to agree with earlier studies by this author which concluded that students in Nigeria Universities were at best Computer Semi-illiterates.

Overall, health professionals were pleased with the services they received from Librarians. When asked to rate the services received in general from the Librarians, the ratings were generally positive.

The percentage of the respondents for each category ranging from excellent to unsatisfactory are shown in Table II along with the librarians' assessment of their services. However, the reliability of the information was in general satisfactory 101 respondents (40.8%) (instead of excellent 10 94.1%). This may be due to the fact that since most health information originated from Overseas, by the time the Medical Libraries received it, those health professionals who had direct access to them either on-line or through relatives abroad would have known about it.

The Librarians in their response had the tendency to be more positive than were their patrons when rating the services provided. This may be why Creth, S.D. (1993)⁷ suggested that Librarians stepped back, reflect and assess objectively whether services they provided first and foremost are designed to meet needs of users or internal requirements of Library Staff. Librarians felt their services were useful, 17 respondents (89.5%) timely, 15 respondents (78.9%) and valuable, 11 respondents 11 (57.8%).

Health professional and librarians were asked to rate a series of paired descriptors. One set describing work related characteristics of Librarians and the other set describing personality related characteristics of Librarians. Average rating are displayed on table III. The greatest variation of the work related characteristics emerged in the "people oriented" or "task oriented categories", with health professionals saying that librarians were significantly more task oriented than Librarians felt themselves to be (37.2%). However all respondents rated Librarians more people oriented than task oriented (i.e health professional = 85.0% and Librarians 100%). The health respondents also saw the Librarians as very approachable, hence people oriented (81.7%).

Skills for Successful Librarians

Both Librarians and the health professionals were asked to identify the three skills they felt were most important to Librarians success (see table IV). The two groups alike felt communication skills were the most important. After this first choice, the two groups differed. Librarians ranked inter-personal skills second while health professionals ranked this skill 5th. Librarians preferred analytical skills (3rd) while health professionals ranked them sixth. Computer/technological skills were ranked 5th by Librarians but second by health professionals. These

differences of opinion reflects health professionals awareness of the importance of computer in information work as well as their lack of awareness of the analytical skills needed to use electronic sources.

Health professional ranked subject expertise 3rd while Librarians who understand that familiarity with literature of a discipline does not necessarily depend on indepth knowledge of the discipline itself ranked it fourth. Teaching skill on the other hand was ranked 7th by the health professionals while the Librarians ranked it third. This may be due to the fact that the patrons are not aware that Librarians are constantly giving formal or informal instructions to the users even with the introduction of technologies which has increased bibliographic instructions given by Librarians.

Overall, health science Librarians are not viewed as negatively as previous studies revealed. They were viewed as approachable and supportive. However, the information provided were not regarded as the most recent in the global context. This suggests that health sciences Librarians in Nigeria in general and Lagos in particular have new challenges of finding solutions to problems that debar them from sourcing updated and timely information. This may involve seeking alternative means of sourcing foreign exchange for purchase of foreign based health information. They may need to explore the possibility of creating a data base from locally generated health information which is likely to be more relevant and hence more useful to the needs of Health Professionals in Nigeria. This view is supported by Sturges P and George Chimsiew (1996)⁸ who posit that "a close alliance between libraries repacking and distribution units is the hope in the immediate future for solving most of the problems which have arisen as result of 'book and information famine' in majority of African Countries". Nweke, K.M.L (1993)⁹ on the other hand suggested that provision of abstracting services based on local medical information received in the library could be another way of enhancing the quality of services provided by the library.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the analysis of data collected revealed that health professionals ranked good communication as the most important skill for the Librarian. They also ranked subject expertise second.

They viewed Librarians as approachable, responsive, supportive and open to change. They also reported receiving accurate and reliable information, however they complained the information received was usually not the most timely or update information on the discipline. The Librarians on the other hand were usually more positive in their responses suggesting that they did their best within the harsh economic situation they worked. However, this study have revealed the need for the Health Science

Librarian to find alternative means of meeting the needs of the health professional if Medical Librarians are to have central role in the future health services. They must find ways to articulate and act upon a vision that involves them more fully in the work of the Health professionals. The Librarian must initiate an intergrated and collaborative roles for themselves in the Health Sciences Community. They must find time to develop and evaluate current services in relation to quality and users needs. Other interest groups (should be actively involved in library planning and program development (e.g. information repacking). The Librarian must also be prepared to let go past practices that no longer serve users needs effectively. Librarians need to update their professional knowledge continuously and be willing to accept the excitement and discomfort that occur in a rapidly changing environment of the Health Science Community.

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