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CHARTING CONSUMER HEALTH

e-MENTAL HEALTH: PROVIDING QUALITY MENTAL HEALTH INFORMATION TO PRACTITIONERS AND THE PUBLIC

**Sally Gore
Elaine Martin**

INTRODUCTION

The Internet has become a prominent place for many Americans to turn when seeking insight into conditions and diseases, medical treatments, health insurance, or any number of topics related to healthful living (1). While the debate continues regarding the possible benefits and risks of health information online (2,3), the quality of information found (4-6), and the question of standards and guidelines for assessing quality (7), the fact remains that eight out of ten users choose the Internet for access to health information (1).

One particular type of health information sought online is mental health information, also called e-mental health. E-mental health information serves a number of purposes for both mental health professionals and the public. Tools that enhance clinical work, patient management instruments, clinical guidelines, outlets for professional networking and continuing education opportunities are available online to practitioners. Resources to aid in research, including access to scientific journals, databases and information on clinical trials, are also obtainable electronically, either free of charge or for a subscription fee.

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From the community health perspective, a wide range and quality of e-mental health information is available for consumers (8) including patient information, directories of service providers, information and referral services, and links to support groups. Patients, their families and caregivers can find a host of Web-based resources to help them better understand the condition(s) faced and treatments prescribed.

Developments in information technology and information access during the past decade have made all of this valuable electronic information available to diverse populations as never before, but with one significant caveat. Inadequate organization and centralization of resources makes it difficult for mental health professionals or consumers to easily access them. Valuable e-mental health resources are certainly available, but do little good for either the patient or practitioner when they remain hidden in an ever-expanding virtual haystack.

More than a quarter of a century ago, Ellen Gartenfeld, then project director of the Community Health Information Network, challenged medical librarians to apply their skills to organize and deliver health materials effectively to those needing them. "If we don't, someone else will, and we'll have allowed another of our responsibilities to go to some other kind of new 'information professional'" (9). Combining experience and expertise with today's information technology, health sciences librarians can do much to improve the organization of and access to quality mental health information.

This paper outlines the three steps medical librarians can take to locate, organize, develop and deliver quality e-mental health resources effectively for mental health professionals and their patients. These three steps are: 1) Establishing partnerships; 2) Developing and delivering resources; and 3) Providing training and outreach. In addition, the authors highlight two specific projects, from the University of Massachusetts Medical School and Boston University School of

Medicine, respectively, which serve as successful models of e-mental health resources. By following these steps and modeling the projects described, medical librarians can successfully meet the information demands of mental health care practitioners, patients and the general public.

LIBRARIANS' ROLES AND OPPORTUNITIES

Step 1: Establishing Partnerships

Partnership and collaboration are paramount to the success of developing and implementing e-tools effective in meeting the information needs of mental health care providers and the community. The sheer amount of information available today, coupled with the constraints of physical space and limits on available time, often warrant the creation of library services that reach beyond the library's walls. Established trends indicate mental health professionals and their clients increasingly prefer Web-based resources (10).

Essentially, collaboration accomplishes three things. First, partnerships create more relevant and useful resources. By working closely with a specific population, taking into consideration their needs and wants, collaborators gain a tool that is more likely to be used because the stakeholders have input. Time and resources are better applied when addressing an identified need.

Secondly, collaborative efforts tap into a wider knowledge base. Mental health care professionals are the subject experts and working with them offers much in terms of locating and including resources that might be omitted without their recommendation. Equally important, these established partnerships provide health care professionals with a better understanding of and appreciation for the services and resources the library and its professional medical librarians offer, bringing renewed attention to the value of librarianship (11).

Finally, library collaboration with other medical school departments or health professions

increases funding opportunities. Addressing health information needs is a larger problem than any one entity can manage. Government agencies such as the National Institutes of Mental Health and the National Library of Medicine are aware of this and offer funding opportunities to projects and programs that reach across disciplines, finding creative solutions.

Step 2: Developing and Delivering Resources

The Internet has given mental health professionals and the general public equal access to a wide variety of authoritative and useful information that may help improve treatment – if they are able to find it. The nature of the Internet allows psychiatrists, psychologists, social workers and other professionals access to materials in the workplace. From computers in their offices or clinics, they can easily view the information themselves and share it with clients. One of the great attributes of the Web is its ability to deliver information to people when and where it is most convenient. Librarians may exploit this attribute by creating organized, content-rich e-resources to benefit library patrons.

Building upon the knowledge gained through established partnerships, e-mental health resources can be developed that address the specific needs of particular populations. Creating a Web-based tool for a specific group also affords a ready audience to assist in site development. Decisions regarding content, design and layout can be made in conjunction with those who will be the primary users of the site. Finally, usability testing with members of this same group ensures the resource functions as intended.

The task of developing Web-based resources may prove daunting to the librarian lacking experience or expertise in the technical aspects of this work, but collaborative efforts promise involvement of those with the necessary skills and give opportunities for a number of parties to engage in the process. Such endeavors also further advance partnerships with faculty,

researchers, patients and other medical school departments that may prove valuable in future projects.

Step 3: Providing Training and Outreach

Outreach projects and information literacy training offer medical librarians another opportunity to meet the needs of mental health care professionals and the public. Information literacy refers to the skills individuals must possess to recognize when information is needed, how to find it and how to apply it effectively. (12). These skills become increasingly important in a contemporary environment of rapid technological change and proliferating information resources. As more information comes to individuals in unfiltered formats, more questions are raised about its authenticity, validity, and reliability. Gaining skills in information literacy multiplies opportunities for individuals to use a wide variety of information sources, expand knowledge, ask informed questions, and sharpen critical thinking for further self-directed learning.

While there is no evidence that providing quality Web-based information to people with mental health problems alone improves mental health literacy (13), one study of individuals with major mental illnesses concluded that “effective health education offers recipients dynamic empowerment that allows them to assume personal responsibility and implement knowledge-based behaviors to change their lifestyles. These changes promote improved self esteem and increased competency for performing the intellectual, emotional and physical skills essential for community living”(14).

Additional research supports the finding that educational resources and materials may provide consumers with the information and support necessary to improve their health (3). Clients who come to their mental health care providers equipped with basic information about their conditions are more likely to engage in quality conversation leading to better treatment.

Likewise, readily available patient education materials or referral information benefits mental health practitioners struggling to meet patient demands within a limited time.

Helping mental health professionals become aware of current research is another area where medical librarians can contribute. While research has broadened the understanding of mental health and highlighted the potential for improving mental health care, practice often lags behind the discoveries (15). Evidence-based practices, those treatment and services supported by rigorous clinical research, are too often delayed because the practitioner is unaware of or cannot access published findings. Offering information literacy training to mental health professionals enhances their ability to find the latest evidence-based mental health care, thereby increasing the likelihood they will use current treatment standards.

Finally, the growth of the Internet promises to enhance mental health literacy in the community and provide mental health programs to many who do not seek or cannot access professional treatment. Mental health websites are very popular, often providing information to consumers who might not otherwise seek professional mental health services (12). Therefore, it becomes even more important that librarians help increase public awareness of quality mental health resources and improve their skills in finding and evaluating mental health information on the Web.

Model Projects

Two Web-based resources currently provide the residents of Massachusetts with quality mental health information and serve as successful models for librarians interested in developing similar resources. e-Mental Health in Central Massachusetts (<http://library.umassmed.edu/ementalhealth/>) is a project of the Lamar Soutter Library of the University of Massachusetts Medical School (UMMS) in collaboration with the UMMS Department of Psychiatry and the Commonwealth of Massachusetts Department of Mental

Health. The site was launched in April 2005, and offers both practitioners and consumers a central location for valuable resources. These include links to authoritative patient education materials related to the most common mental health conditions and disorders, a searchable database of mental health care providers in the Central Massachusetts region, up-to-date news items associated with mental health, clinical assessment tools, and a direct link to library services including professional reference assistance and document delivery. The site is maintained by a professional medical librarian who also provides outreach and training sessions to mental health care providers as well as the general public.

e-Mental Health in Central Massachusetts averages three hundred visitors each month. Bookmarks and handouts are available at the Library and clinical locations, promoting the use of the site and advertising training sessions. The most popular features include the database of service providers and links to educational resources. Faculty and students of UMMS consider access to clinical information, particularly the downloadable self-tests for patients and clinician-administered tests, especially useful. The website continues to evolve as new resources and features are requested.

Boston University's Mental Health Information Network (<http://mhin.bu.edu/index.cfm>) is another collaborative project providing information and training to mental health care providers and the public. The Boston University Medical Center, Alumni Medical Library, and the Commonwealth of Massachusetts Department of Mental Health, Metro Boston Area have joined to create and maintain a Web portal with links to reputable resources as well as original content provided by local practitioners. The site is organized and maintained by librarians at the Alumni Medical Library. Additionally, workshops are held to teach information literacy skills to patients and clinicians throughout the area. Topics include strategies for finding health

information on the Web, and using MedlinePlus[®], PubMed and other National Library of Medicine databases.

Both of these examples demonstrate collaborative efforts to produce multi-faceted and integrative solutions to meet the information needs of a particular population within a given state or region. Both projects:

- exemplify the role medical librarians can play in locating, collecting, organizing, and evaluating e-mental health resources and then, developing an online tool that makes those resources available at the point of care via the Internet.
- were started with outside funding, provided by the National Library of Medicine.
- continue to be maintained by their host institution because of their importance and their ongoing commitment to information access for the targeted population.
- serve as successful models of what librarians can achieve with just a little bit of money and successful collaborations.

CONCLUSION

There exists a significant need among practitioners and the public for authoritative mental health information, and many are turning to the Internet in an attempt to satisfy it. Medical librarians are encouraged to take the initiative and assume leadership roles in delivering the many valuable e-mental health resources to help these different populations. The three steps outlined in this paper and the two model projects described offer concrete help. By establishing

partnerships with mental health care professionals and reaching out to the general public, medical librarians use their skills and expertise to create effective e-tools tailored to bring needed resources to mental health professionals, their patients and caregivers. By teaching a variety of levels of information literacy, from finding quality health information on the Internet to complex database searching, librarians make a difference in the level of care both given and received. Through such endeavors, librarians ensure Ellen Gartenfeld's warning of "another information professional" usurping them in this Information Age shall not come to pass.

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