

# Consumer Health Information Services in Philippine Libraries: Navigating Obstacles and Capitalizing on Opportunities\*

Joenabie Encanto Arevalo  
 Librarian, Ateneo de Manila University  
 School of Medicine and Public Health  
 Lecturer, University of the Philippines  
 School of Library and Information Studies

## Abstract

*The limited role of medical libraries in providing consumer health information services in the Philippines presents a challenge. To address such a challenge, this paper suggests that information professionals, healthcare providers, and the government must collaborate to meet the information needs of healthcare consumers. Information professionals can be crucial in promoting health literacy by providing access to reliable and easy-to-understand health information. They must be equipped with the necessary skills to assess the readability of resources and identify signs of low literacy among library patrons. Librarians should develop more relevant and effective health information services tailored to the specific needs of their communities. Professional organizations and library schools must work together to provide comprehensive training for librarians by identifying current trends and gaps in the field and incorporating them into the curriculum. By working together, these stakeholders can overcome the challenges faced by medical libraries and provide healthcare consumers with the information and resources they need to make informed decisions about their health.*

**Keywords:** Consumer Health Information, Consumer Health Information Services, Consumer Health Librarians, Health Information Services, Medical Libraries

Initial research conducted via email and social media chat showed that medical libraries in the Philippines do not extensively provide consumer health information services. The researcher contacted various medical libraries in the country to gather information and insights on their services for the general public. It was discovered that there are significant gaps in the availability and accessibility of consumer health information resources in these

libraries. However, libraries in hospitals and academic institutions provide information services to medical practitioners. The literature suggests that medical practitioners are responsible for giving information to patients, their relatives, and the public as health consumers. The Code of Ethics of the Medical Profession (2019), jointly approved by the Philippine Medical Association (PMA) and the Professional Regulation Commission (PRC),

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“requires physicians to provide relevant, simple yet understandable information for patients and their clientele” (Philippine Medical Association, 2019, Section 3.6).

The COVID-19 pandemic affected consumers’ health consciousness and influenced the proliferation and utilization of health information resources. Under these circumstances, Huber and Snyder (2002) maintained that the debate around who should be responsible for fulfilling the information needs of healthcare consumers continues. This holds true up to now. In this pandemic, good health literacy has never been more crucial. This paper argues that collaboration between information professionals, healthcare providers, and the government is necessary to meet the information needs of healthcare consumers. Information professionals can improve health literacy by providing access to accurate and understandable health information. In the context of the Philippines, where they may be individuals who do not have access to health information, information professionals can partner with community organizations, schools, health centers, and other non-government organizations to provide health literacy programs and resources.

Health literacy can protect our health and prevent problems. According to the World Health Organization (WHO), health literacy is “the personal characteristics and social resources needed for individuals and communities to access, understand, appraise, and use information and services to make decisions about health” (Dodson et al., 2014, p. 12). Should health problems arise, health literacy can help better manage them and help us understand our health choices and their consequences. To understand these choices and their consequences, we need to be able to locate and use health information.

The Canadian Public Health Association Expert Panel on Health Literacy further highlights the significance of accessing and re-evaluating those resources to make informed decisions and promote and protect health (Rootman & Gordon-El-Bihbety, 2008). According to the expert panel, research shows that health-literate patients can make healthy lifestyle choices, communicate better with healthcare providers, access information and services, manage chronic disease, and engage with health education and promotion. Health literacy is also a way to promote, maintain and improve health across the life course.

The 2019 PMA President, Dr. Jose P. Santiago Jr., emphasized the importance of health information literacy. During the 2019 PMA Annual convention, he asked, “What is the use of hospitals and clinics and an abundance of doctors, nurses, and other medical personnel, if a great number of the population is not informed or literate enough to understand how to make use of them?” (Santiago, 2020, p. 1). Dr. Santiago further stated that low health literacy is linked to poor health outcomes, such as higher rates of hospitalization and less frequent use of preventive services. As a workaround, Dr. Santiago suggested two approaches. First is preventive and promotive, and second is curative and rehabilitative.

As information professionals, we can take part in the first approach. We can participate in the awareness campaign about having a healthy lifestyle and proper hygiene and sanitation. The basics such as handwashing, observing cleanliness, eating nutritious food, and using clean can prevent sickness. Immunization is also part of the preventive aspect of care. It is best for librarians to only share credible information about vaccines or other health-related information, for that matter.

The second approach, curative and rehabilitative, has to do with seeking professional advice and support at the onset of illness. As information professionals, we should refer our clients to medical practitioners, even though we know where to find correct information about a particular illness, disease, drug, or treatment. We should direct our users to the correct information and direct them to the medical professionals who can give them sound professional advice. We should refrain from interpreting medical information and keep our opinions to ourselves.

### **CONSUMER HEALTH LIBRARIANS AND CONSUMER HEALTH INFORMATION**

In 2008, the Medical Subject Heading (MeSH) term “Consumer Health Information” was introduced. According to the National Library of Medicine (n.d.), consumer health information “is intended for potential users of medical and healthcare services. There is an emphasis on self-care and preventive approaches as well as information for community-wide dissemination and use.” According to Nancy C. Seeger (2015), in the book *Meeting Health Information Needs Outside of Healthcare*, consumer health information is:

*Designed to be educational and can help individuals make decisions about health-related behavior and medical treatments. It differs from clinical information—that is, information written by and for medical professionals—because consumer health information is developed with the layperson in mind, with less technical language and more user-friendly formats. Consumer health information may include resources about prevention rather than cure, more about self-care and wellness, diseases and conditions, sometimes about treatment, health care options, and more. (p. 118)*

Several studies have identified the job title “consumer health librarian” as a specialized job position within the field of library and information science. Cooper and Crum (2013) identified consumer health librarian as one of the four new twists to old roles. Ma et al. (2018) stated that consumer health librarians meet the information requirements of patients, their families, and the broader community by providing user-friendly access to a wide range of information resources. Other job titles who perform similar roles may be “health librarians” or “health information specialists.” Their duties involve managing the collections, from selection to circulation of consumer health information; providing guidelines for online databases and selecting quality websites; preparing publications for specific health topics; coordinating with medical professionals; and supervising staff. Consumer health librarians are medical librarians focusing on consumer health, but they can also be academic, public, or special librarians with consumer health as a subject specialty. Consumer health librarians may be working in hospital libraries, where they may also be medical librarians who support clinicians, nurses, and other staff. Consumer health librarians may also work in patient resource centers, health agencies, and academic and public libraries.

The Medical Library Association (MLA, n.d.) offers training for librarians on Consumer Health Information Specialization (CHIS). According to their website, this training is intended for medical librarians, public librarians, librarians working in consumer health libraries, allied health professionals, information professionals, and anyone who cares about providing accurate and valuable health information to the public. The requirement to earn CHIS is organized around

eight Core Competencies for Providing Consumer Health Information Services and two levels of accomplishment (MLA, n.d.). Level I CHIS requires coursework in Competencies 1-5. These are:

1. Know the Community
2. Know the Health Consumer
3. Knowledge of the Subject Matter and Resources
4. Evaluation of Health Information
5. Communication, Health Reference, and Instruction

Level II CHIS requires coursework in all eight competencies. In addition to the Level I competencies are the following three:

6. Literacy and Health Literacy
7. Technology and Health
8. Ethical and Legal Issues (MLA, n.d.).

The first competency, Know the Community, involves discovering the characteristics of the community served by the library, including demographics, special populations, health status indicators, and needs of community members. Librarians must understand that beliefs, customs, and values of different cultures can influence thoughts and actions around health, illness, and health care decisions. Librarians must be respectful and responsive to all user groups. Librarians must practice cultural humility through self-reflection and awareness that one’s own beliefs and experiences can impact interactions with others; and be open to learning about the experiences and cultural identity of others as a lifelong endeavor.

The second competency, Know the Health Consumer, requires understanding the principles and practices of providing appropriate, relevant information services to meet the needs of different types of users, including patients, caregivers, educators, students, and health practitioners. Librarians must understand and respond to the issues and barriers faced by health information seekers.

The third competency, Knowledge of the Subject Matter and Resources, requires solid knowledge of specific resources for general and specialized health topics and specific population groups or users with special needs. Librarians must know the library’s print collection, both circulating and reference materials. Librarians must be well-versed in library subscription databases, including the coverage of materials, currency, and appropriateness for specific requests.

Librarians must know quality web-based resources and strive to stay current as resources change or are replaced with new resources.

The fourth competency, Evaluation of Health Information, involves understanding the principles of evaluating consumer health information for quality. Librarians must apply quality criteria when selecting items for the print or electronic collection. Librarians must also be able to critically examine and filter materials from web-based and other resources when choosing an appropriate resource for a particular patron. Librarians must also provide users with sound evaluation criteria and guidance for finding appropriate health materials.

For the fifth competency, Communication, Health Reference, and Instruction, librarians must know and apply effective communication techniques; understand and apply the additional components of health reference interviewing. Librarians must recognize and take advantage of teachable moments with patrons. Librarians must effectively teach users how to use search engines, library catalogs and subscription databases, reference materials, and online resources.

For the sixth competency, Literacy and Health Literacy, librarians must understand the related issues of literacy and health literacy and the principles and practices of serving users with low literacy skills or low health literacy, including knowledge of understandable and appropriate print, online, and multimedia health materials. Librarians must be able to gauge the readability of a resource and be aware of signs of low literacy in patrons. Librarians must recognize that low health literacy can affect anyone regardless of education or socioeconomic level.

The seventh competency, Technology and Health, requires librarians to understand current technology used by patrons within and outside of the library. Librarians must know emerging technology trends in health-related social networking, mobile access, electronic health records, and personal health records. Librarians must have proficiency in assisting users with library computers, the library catalog, subscription-based health information resources, Internet searches, and web-based health resources.

Finally, the eighth competency, Ethical and Legal Issues, involves understanding ethical issues surrounding the provision of medical information,

including the use of discretion and the patron's need and right to privacy. Librarians must know and apply the library's policies regarding disclaimers when providing medical information. Librarians must only provide recommendations for health information resources and never provide medical advice. Librarians must understand the limitations of the librarian's role and always recommend that the user discusses the information received with a health professional.

These competencies will enable librarians to develop more relevant and effective health information services tailored to the specific needs of the community. Consequently, these will help health information users identify trustworthy sources and navigate the vast amount of information available. Awareness of ethical and legal issues ensures that services are conducted legally and ethically, protecting the privacy of users. To make informed decisions about their health, librarians must provide users access to relevant and understandable health information.

#### **CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES IN MEDICAL AND CONSUMER HEALTH LIBRARIANSHIP IN THE PHILIPPINES**

In the Philippines, there are no established programs in formal higher education offered for medical librarians, even more so for consumer health librarians. Only the University of the Philippines School of Library and Information Studies (UP SLIS) offers electives for medical and health librarianship, but students are not required to take them. The Medical and Health Librarians Association of the Philippines (MAHLAP) provides venues for medical librarians to share best practices and expertise. MAHLAP also provides training and upskilling for medical and health librarians to keep up with trends and serve their communities better.

The National Library of the Philippines (NLP) does not have a medical or consumer health corner. However, NLP offers a wide range of resources, including health-related publications, both online and in print, to encourage health literacy in communities. There are health-related publications available in NLP reading rooms and NLP-affiliated public libraries. On the other hand, libraries in government hospitals do not cater to patients and their relatives. Library resources are for hospital staff only. The only medical library that entertains the general public as clients is the Department of Health - Central Library in Sta. Cruz, Manila. To

access the library collection, clients are highly advised to check the electronic library system through <http://elibrary.doh.gov.ph>.

For libraries planning to offer consumer health information services, the key is identifying the spectrum of services to be offered. Each service must be tailored to the needs of the community. Librarians must have the necessary skills and training to provide the service. So, what can we do to provide health information responsibly?

Librarians are always expected to assist in finding information, no matter what type it is. So first, medical and health librarians should help refine information requests. Librarians need to recognize that there will be complex questions, not just simple directional questions and that there will be follow-up questions. Most importantly, librarians should remember not to give personal medical advice. Librarians should not interpret medical information for their clients; these clients should be referred to health professionals. Secondly, librarians need to know what resources are available; are these authoritative? Are they from reliable sources? Librarians should always remember that we must have good information to counter bad information. Below are some of the recommended questions to ask when picking a resource:

- Is the information appropriate for the user?
- Can the person understand the information?
- Does the information answer the user's question/s?
- Is the information accessible?

Librarians should prepare appropriate materials based on who is asking and always observe confidentiality. Consumers of health information have health issues, so librarians should always be compassionate and considerate to users. We must be able to know our professional boundaries and be able to direct our users to health professionals. We must be cautious in offering health information related to symptoms and treatment options. There's a thin line between providing health information sources and giving personal medical advice. Librarians can receive training and improve their skills through professional organizations like the MAHLAP. By working together, professional organizations and library schools can offer more comprehensive training for librarians. Library schools can work with professional organizations to identify current trends

and gaps in the field and to incorporate these into the curriculum.

In conclusion, the limited role of medical libraries in providing consumer health information services in the Philippines presents a challenge. This highlights the need for collaboration among information professionals, healthcare providers, and the government to improve health literacy and provide access to accurate and understandable health information.

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## AUTHOR BIOGRAPHY

**Joenabie Encanto Arevalo** is the librarian of the Ateneo de Manila University - School of Medicine and Public Health. She also teaches medical and health librarianship electives at the UP School of Library and Information Studies, where she also obtained her bachelor's degree, cum laude (2004) and master's degree (2011) in Library and Information Science. She ranked 5th in the 2004 Librarians Licensure Examination.

Her leadership skills are reflected in her role as the former President of the Medical and Health Librarians Association of the Philippines (MAHLAP) and her current position as an advisor to the MAHLAP Board of Trustees. She has contributed research papers in refereed journals, delivered paper presentations and chaired/co-chaired several technical sessions in both national and international conferences. Also with MAHLAP, she has been active in organizing various seminars, conferences, and workshops. Her research interests include medical and health librarianship, medical e-resources, and curation.

Email: [jencanto@ateneo.edu](mailto:jencanto@ateneo.edu)



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