

IN FOCUS / EN PROFONDEUR

Featuring: Tim Tripp

*Director, Library Services, Centre for Addiction and Mental Health
Degrees and professional designations held: BSc, MLIS*



Tell us about your current position

I've been in my current role only a few months now, so I'm still learning about it! The Centre for Addiction and Mental Health (CAMH) and its library is a fascinating place to work. There's much that you would find typical in a library for an academic teaching hospital, but there's much that's unique as well. Focussing on a patient population that has mental health and addiction issues is a real eye-opener. I find it's totally changing my perspective on much of news and even pop culture – once your awareness has been raised around issues of stigma, language, trauma, etc., you can't help but place a different lens over everything that you look at.

It's been a while since I've worked in an actual library, so it's fun getting re-acquainted with that world. There's the more mundane – we just completed our annual subscription cancellation, er, I mean renewal, process. And then there's the truly exciting – we've just kicked off planning for brand new space in a building that is yet to be built. We'll spend three years planning and then three years building, and if all goes according to plan, we'll be moving into a brand new space at CAMH's Queen Street West campus in downtown Toronto in 2020. The new space should be amazing – we'll be sharing ground floor space right on Queen St. West with the new student centre, conference centre, and Workman Arts theatre.

There really is a transformation happening all across CAMH. It's impacting everything from the physical spaces to clinical practice. I think the next decade here is going to be a blast!

Your previous positions have been quite information technology (IT) intensive. What made you decide to move into a new role? How does your previous IT experience inform your work as the Director of Library Services at CAMH?

The last 13 years I've been in a “nontraditional” role, that's true, but I've always thought I'd return to the library world at some point. I've always loved the field, which is why I maintained my connections, primarily through my involvement in CHLA, with health librarians across the country. It's not often an opportunity like this comes along, so I jumped at the chance. I think having IT experience is a definite benefit. So much of what we do is dependent upon technology that it really streamlines things when your IT folk know that you understand their language and their constraints.

Having that background allows me to participate in other projects that are going on within Education at CAMH. There are a number of technology heavy projects around portal development and mobile app development that I'm just starting to get involved with, but I think the variety of work that I'm going to be getting involved with is incredible.

What do you find most interesting about your work?

I'm still in that honeymoon phase, so all of it's interesting! I mentioned the variety already, but some days I have to sit back and just marvel at the type of things I get to take part in: designing new spaces, strategic planning, and learning about the subject areas in addictions and mental health... The CAMH Archives also report to me, which is really cool. Learning about the history of our founding organizations as well as that of psychiatry is fascinating.

What has been your greatest professional challenge?

I think my greatest challenge is just beginning! I've always advocated for the importance of libraries and librarians, but working in IT, I've never really been on the hook to demonstrate that value. That's just changed for me – big time – especially in a time when libraries themselves are transforming. Planning for a new library space is bringing this home for me – what should a library look like in 2020? Given that we're going to be given prime real estate, how much of that space, if any, should be given over to print collections that are being less and less used? If our real value is our expertise, then how do you build a library space to feature that? I've got a bit more time to try to come up with some ideas, but not a lot!

How did you become interested in medical librarianship?

Let me answer that in two parts. I became interested in librarianship when I realized near the end of my undergrad that I didn't actually want to be a marine biologist. I switched to part-time studies and got a part-time clerical job in the university library. By the time I'd graduated, a full-time, paraprofessional position came up on the science floor, so I applied and got the job. I fell in love with doing reference work there, teaching people how to find answers to their questions. After a couple years, I decided to go to library school so I could advance. What drew me to health libraries was my hatred of commuting! I was living in downtown Toronto, but working in Brampton. When one of the downtown teaching hospitals was looking for a project manager to implement their virtual library, my first thought, was that I could walk to work! In preparing for that job interview, though, I became fascinated by the potential for technology to be able to integrate knowledge or evidence at the point of care. I still am.

What was your background before you became a medical librarian?

Most of my undergrad was in marine biology. I grew up on Jacques Cousteau documentaries and always wanted to join the crew of the Calypso! Thank goodness for field courses. A few weeks on the Bay of Fundy weighing sea urchins made me realize that a life devoted to the scientific method wasn't for me. So after falling in love with librarianship, and getting my MLIS, I worked for a while at CISTI, and then took a job at Spar Aerospace, managing the library there. In 1999, I left Spar (which had then become MD Robotics) for the University Health Network as a project manager in their IT department, where at one point I was managing a software development group with about 30 staff.

What would you be doing if you weren't a librarian?

At this point in my life, if I hadn't found such an engaging job, I'd probably be a farm hand! Well, a farm hand of sorts. A friend of mine recently fulfilled his dream of opening a dog psychology and rehabilitation centre in the country. He's doing amazing work and has already saved a couple of beautiful animals in the month he's been there. I was very tempted to say good-bye to the city, and move out there to help him and his wife run the place. Imagine a job where bringing your dog with you isn't just allowed, but considered mandatory. I'm still holding out for that as a retirement option!

You've been involved with CHLA/ABSC for several years and were instrumental in developing much of the Association's online presence as the webmaster several years running. How did things look when you started, and how did they evolve over the years? Do you have any thoughts on the future potential of online media to further the mission of library associations?

Back when I started, there was still very much a dependence on "big IT" for lack of a better phrase. There's

been a huge democratization in technology – really enabling a more DIY-type culture. You no longer need to depend on IT for solutions to your problems. If you need to do something on the web, chances are that "there's an app for that" which will help you do what you need to do.

What other organizations are you involved in?

Being in Toronto provides an embarrassment of riches when it comes to other professional associations. I'm currently a member of Toronto Health Libraries Association (THLA), and as a teaching hospital library, all of us in the CAMH Library are involved with the Health Sciences Information Consortium of Toronto. I'm looking forward to joining SALIS – the Substance Abuse Librarians and Information Specialists and am re-evaluating other potential association membership now that I'm back in an actual library setting. I also sit on the board of my condo corporation.

Whom do you admire, and why?

Maybe it's because I need to figure out what a library should look like in the 21st century, but I find myself reading a lot of Stephen Abram's writings. He's visionary to the extreme, but it's great fun to try to imagine what he's seeing! He's an incredible advocate for libraries and his enthusiasm is energizing!

Tell us about some of your hobbies

I'm really a geek at heart. I like playing with technology and maintain some websites, such as the one for my condo. I watch an unhealthy amount of television! And, I love mid-century design – especially in furniture and architecture.

What is your favourite place in Canada, and why?

I can't pick just one. I love every city I've ever lived in, Guelph, Halifax, Ottawa, Toronto. I also love the north and our rural areas. We have such a treasure of spaces in this country. But I can't think of favourite places without thinking of the people there that I've loved – friends and family – that's what really makes a place special.

What advice would you give to a new member of CHLA or someone new to the field?

Well, if you're new to the field and NOT a member of CHLA, join now! Then, take advantage of the networking opportunities. You've got a great support group to help you make the most of your chosen career. Don't waste that opportunity!

We gratefully acknowledge the Medical Library Association's permission to adapt the question list from the MLA News Member Spotlight feature.