

Consumer health information

Compiled by Susan Murray

Book reviews

The Medical Library Association (MLA)/Neal-Schuman has published two books on answering health questions that are highly recommended—one for reference librarians and the other intended for the general public.

Spatz M. *Answering consumer health questions: the Medical Library Association guide for reference librarians*. New York: Neal-Schuman Publishers Inc.; 2008. 150 pages (soft cover). ISBN: 978-155570-632-6. US\$65.00.

In *Answering consumer health questions*, veteran consumer health librarian Michele Spatz discusses the emotional and ethical issues involved in providing health information to the public and strategies for responding to the most common consumer health questions.

Spatz is the Director of the Planetree Health Resource Center, a community-based consumer health library at The Dalles, Oregon, and has taught a continuing education course on this topic for the MLA for over 10 years. This practical guide—written in an easy-to-understand, conversational style—gives examples of librarian-consumer interactions with advice on how to respond.

The seven chapters cover the various facets of consumer health information reference service: understanding health information seekers, communication strategies and guidelines, professional ethics, legal issues, serving the health information needs of diverse individuals and difficult clients, and self-care for health information providers. There is a nice mix of useful “exhibits” (information request forms, sample disclaimers, rules of conduct policies, etc.) and appendices (the Medical Library Association and American Library Association (ALA) Codes of Ethics and the ALA Library Bill of Rights).

As a consumer health librarian for more than 17 years, I found many things in this book of value to a librarian at any stage in their career. Although we are aware that there are challenges in providing health information to individuals with no medical background who are frightened and confused when they contact us for help, we may not fully understand the psychological dimensions of our clients, as well as the impact on ourselves. Spatz has crafted a heartfelt book that is highly recommended for all librarians and health professionals who provide consumer health information (CHI) services.

Townsend Kane L, McConnaughy RP, Wilson SP, Townsend DL (MD, medical consultant). *Answers to the*

health questions people ask in libraries: A Medical Library Association guide. New York: Neal-Schuman Publishers Inc.; 2008. 247 pages (soft cover). ISBN: 978-155570-642-5. US\$65.00.

Co-authored by three librarians at the School of Medicine Library, University of South Carolina, and a physician, *Answers to the health questions people ask in libraries* is a book for a consumer audience that provides authoritative answers to the common health care questions that are asked in libraries. To collect this information, a survey (included in the appendix) was sent to hundreds of libraries in North America, and more than 270 responses were received.

The entries are written in a question and answer format and provide concise, easy-to-understand explanations of common health conditions and treatments. The six chapters cover

- (i) major health concerns (heart health, cancer diabetes, HIV/AIDS);
- (ii) family health (women, children, men, seniors, general family, vaccinations);
- (iii) nutrition and fitness (nutrition and exercise, vitamins and supplements, alcohol and stimulants);
- (iv) complementary and alternative medicine;
- (v) drug information;
- (vi) “odds and ends” (unusual or misunderstood medical conditions, technology-related questions).

At the end of each chapter is an “Ask the Experts” section that lists the categories of health care professionals who can help consumers answer more in-depth questions related to the issues. The book includes very current references in each chapter and, at the end of the book, an index, a glossary of experts (definitions of the specialty with links to a directory or association), and print and Web resources for further information.

Although I haven’t seen the survey results, I was surprised that health care system questions such as where to find a doctor, how to understand medical credentials, hospital ratings, insurance coverage, etc., were not reported as common questions. Also, the “Where to Go When You Want to Know about Health Care” section could have been more extensive than the five and a half pages devoted to it and should have listed some other excellent Web sites, such as <http://www.oncolink.com/> for general cancer questions.

Apart from these minor points, however, this book is highly recommended for public and consumer health libraries, as well as health care settings where the public seeks understandable health information.

Notable new publications and Web sites

Medspeak in Plain Language is now available in French; CHLA / ABSC assisted in translating the brochure. It contains the same content as the MLA's original *Deciphering Medspeak* brochure but is written specifically for consumers with a fifth-grade or lower reading level. For free, single copies of the brochure, go to <http://www.mlanet.org/resources/medspeak/french-medspeak.pdf>. To order multiple copies, please contact Tom Pacetti at 312-419-9094, ext. 19.

Deshpande A, Jadad, AR. Trying to measure the quality of health information on the Internet: is it time to move on? *J Rheumatol.* 2009;36:1–3. Available from: <http://www.jrheum.org/cgi/content/full/36/1/1?ct>.

The authors (Dr. Alejandro Jadad is the Founder of the Centre for Global eHealth Innovation in Toronto) state that considerable resources continue to be spent on developing and disseminating quality assessment tools to evaluate on-line health information while there is little evidence to support that there is a link between the quality of information on the Internet and harm. Furthermore, research in this area assumes that the techniques used to evaluate print-based information can be applied to online resources despite the complexity of multiple media formats: Medicine 2.0 or Health 2.0 with tools such as wikis, blogs, podcasts, bookmark tagging, etc. The authors propose new models for health care providers and consumers to identify quality on-line health information:

- (i) a guide or expert source called an apomedary — “this could be a person, group or even a technological tool that helps point user to information sources deemed to be relevant, credible and trustworthy” (Eysenbach G. Medicine 2.0: social networking, collaboration, participation, apomediation, and openness. *J Med Internet Res.* 10:e22. Available from: <http://www.jmir.org/2008/3/e22/>)
- (ii) collaborative filtering systems, such as providing users with relevant information based on their own experience and those of others with similar profiles

Golderman G, Connolly B. Access to health care. *netconnect* (supplement to *Library Journal*). Fall 2008;18–26.

Provides detailed reviews of these electronic health databases: Consumer Health Complete (EBSCO), Current Issues: Health (Wilson), Health and Wellness Resource Center, Health Reference Center Academic (Gale), Health Source: Consumer Edition, Health Source: Nursing/Academic Edition (EBSCO) and ProQuest Family Health, ProQuest MyiLibrary – Family Health (ProQuest).

Landro L. What's new (or improved) in health sites (The Informed Patient). *Wall St J.* 2009 Jan 7. Available from: http://online.wsj.com/article/SB123128697040459161.html?mod=rss_Today%27s_Most_Popular#.

“Last year, health Web sites drew about 72 million unique visitors, up 14% from a year earlier, according to comScore Inc., an online-marketing research firm that tracks some 200 such sites. Such strong growth comes as sites increasingly focus on some of today's leading consumer health concerns, including prescription-drug safety, quality of care, and the ability to network with other patients facing similar health problems.”

This column briefly discusses five consumer health sites: <http://consumermedsafety.org>, <http://whynotthebest.org>, the National Library of Medicine's <http://hazmap.nlm.nih.gov>, <http://www.everydayhealth.com>, <http://www.healthcentral.com>, and two health management sites—Google Health and Microsoft Health Vault.

<http://www.glowm.com/>

The Global Library of Women's Medicine provides detailed clinical information on women's health written by more than 650 specialists. Although this resource is primarily designed for health care professionals, there are some areas for patient information. Also, health librarians can register to access additional features, such as surgical videos, colour atlases of visual medicine, laboratory tests/results, and selected patient information handouts.

www.FamilyDoctor.org

FamilyDoctor.org has been redesigned and integrates their existing peer-reviewed health information with interactive, high-definition video-on-demand. Co-produced by the American Academy of Family Physicians and AnswersMedia under the name Primetime HealthNet, FamilyDoctor.org is the only medical association-sponsored Web site offering vetted health care information in text-based, video, and combined formats (<http://www.aafp.org/online/en/home/publications/news/new-s-now.html>).

www.myoptumhealth.com/

This is the first site for the public from a major health insurer that is not limited to health plan members or employees of large corporate clients. Myoptumhealth.com lets users check symptoms, find specific health or disease information and store personal medical information online. The Advisory Board includes eminent physicians from institutions such as Johns Hopkins and Harvard Medical School.