

BOOK REVIEW / CRITIQUE DE LIVRE

The Accidental Health Sciences Librarian. By Lisa A. Ennis and Nicole Mitchell. Medford, N.J.: Information Today, Inc., 2010. 213 pages (soft cover). ISBN: 9781573873956. US\$29.50.

Many librarians who work in a healthcare environment or provide health information in a variety of settings did not set out to become health sciences librarians. Like the authors, I am an “accidental” health sciences librarian who graduated with a degree in History. I began my career as a film librarian in Ottawa, but upon relocating to Toronto I was hired by the then Science and Medicine Library at the University of Toronto. Not only did I find the library’s subject matter compelling, but I also became hooked by the sleuthing aspect of searching the medical literature via computer. *The Accidental Health Sciences Librarian* is a practical and thoughtful overview of health sciences librarianship for those considering this as a career path and for librarians who have accidentally stumbled into this rewarding career.

Authors Ennis and Mitchell are, respectively, a systems librarian and a reference librarian at the Lister Hill Library of the Health Sciences at the University of Alabama at Birmingham. The goal of their book is to provide a starting point for accidental health sciences librarians.

An impressive amount of information is packed into a slim 213 pages: an introduction by the authors; a foreword by Jean P. Shipman who is a former Medical Library Association (MLA) President who chose to be a health sciences librarian while in high school; and six chapters covering background and essential topics. It also includes four appendices: an online survey posted on MEDLIB-L and MLA chapter lists from March–April 2008; responses to the three questions (1) “What do you love about being a health sciences librarian?”, (2) “What are your least favorite things about being in health sciences librarianship?”, and (3) “What are the greatest challenges in health sciences librarianship today?”; a list of selected health sciences library associations; and a list of selected health sciences organizations. There are also recommended readings and websites arranged by chapter as well as a glossary and index. Interspersed throughout the book are selected anecdotes drawn from the more than 300 librarians who responded to the online survey.

In chapter one, “Health Sciences Librarianship”, the authors dispel the misconceptions that you have to have a science background and that the workplaces are limited to hospitals or medical schools. They provide brief synopses of many types of health-related environments where librarians are employed: academic libraries, veterinary libraries, health education centers, libraries attached to hospitals, consumer health libraries, learning resource centers, and historical collections.

The second chapter, “Putting the Medical in Health Sciences Librarianship”, imparts important background information on some major health organizations and resources: the National Library of Medicine (NLM) and the NLM National Network of libraries; *Index Medicus*, the early printed catalogues of the medical literature; the NLM classification system; the list of Medical Subject Headings (MeSH); the *Cumulated Index to Nursing* (CINAHL); and a list of medical terminology.

Chapter three, “It’s All About the People”, focuses on the clientele, such as consumers, students, clinicians and researchers and offers some important features and caveats in working with these various groups. It briefly discusses emerging areas, such as evidence-based medicine (EBM), systematic reviews, public (or open) access policy, and informatics. It concludes with suggestions for marketing and outreach.

The fourth chapter, “Technology”, reassures readers that they shouldn’t even try to keep up with technology. But they cover some points to consider in ensuring success (or at least sanity): the importance in developing a good relationship with information technology departments, managing your expectations and attitudes, and learning how your computer works. It also provides clear explanations of remote access methods, firewalls, proxy servers (such as EZproxy), and virtual private networks which cause many users a lot of grief. The authors caution librarians to carefully think about using the web and social networking just because it’s the thing to do. Is it relevant for your users? Will it improve your service? Web 2.0 applications can involve a large investment of time to maintain and may not be possible in some settings with high security policies, such as hospitals.

Chapter five, “Databases and Resources”, provides summaries of some essential databases in the health sciences, point-of-care tools (MDConsult and UpToDate), handheld devices, EBM resources (Cochrane Library), as well as specialized databases and resources (such as NORD Rare Diseases Database). It provides tips for negotiating electronic licenses — mainly do not be afraid to negotiate a better price — and suggests that you may want to communicate the high cost of licensed resources to your users as many U.S. health sciences librarians have done.

The sixth and final chapter, “Resources and Networking”, highlights the invaluable information and networking possibilities provided by major health library associations, such as the MLA, U.S. state associations, and about a dozen other organizations, including the Canadian Health Libraries Association/Association des bibliothéques de la santé du Canada (CHLA/ABSC). While CHLA/ABSC is listed here, it is not included in the list of selected health sciences library associations in Appendix C. These organizations provide continuing education opportunities, offer email listservs for discussions, publish newsletters

and journals, and have blogs and RSS feeds to keep current. The MLA also provides a credentialing program (Academy of Health Information Professionals/AHIP) and has an active publishing output with Neal-Schuman.

The Accidental Health Sciences Librarian is an affordable and very readable guide for prospective or new health sciences librarians — even those who have been in the profession for awhile will find some new information in this overview. Although it is not intended to be comprehensive, some mention of nontraditional environments where health sciences librarians work would have been more reflective of the current status and perhaps made it more attractive as a career option. For example, librarians work in law firms as health information specialists, in a variety of health organizations, or may be working as part of a health research team in a nonlibrary setting. Because the book has a U.S. focus, there is little Canadian content, so it would need to be supplemented by other readings. There is no equivalent Canadian book on this topic to my knowledge, but ample information can be found on resources, such as the HLWIKI Canada http://hlwiki.slais.ubc.ca/index.php/UBC_HealthLib-Wiki_-_A_Knowledge-Base_for_Health_Librarians, created and maintained by Dean Giustini at the University of British Columbia, which includes a health librarianship pathfinder. While the personal testimonies included in the chapters offer a range of interesting viewpoints on what it is like to be a health sciences librarian, they break the continuity of the text and might better have been included as an appendix. However, this book is still highly recommended on several levels; it serves as a valuable career information resource for public and high school library collections and for information library science collections. For hospital, academic, and health sciences library collections, it would be useful as an orientation or training tool for newly hired librarians.

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