

## **Health Sciences Librarianship**

*The dissemination of knowledge is one of the cornerstones of civilization. —John F. Budd*

People tend to hold two common misconceptions about health sciences librarianship. One is that, to be a health sciences librarian, you must have a science background. The other is that health sciences librarians only work for medical schools or in hospitals. Both of these statements couldn't be further from the truth. Health sciences librarians come from a variety of backgrounds and hold a variety of degrees across the academic spectrum. They also work in a whole host of different settings, including public libraries, academic and community college libraries (as liaison specialists), corporate libraries, federal agencies, and more. Further, health sciences librarians do all the things any other librarian does, such as marketing, outreach, instruction, and technical services activities. So while you may focus on a particular subject area in the health sciences, the *librarian* part of health sciences librarianship is as wide open as any other facet of librarianship.

In the Accidental Health Sciences Librarian survey, we asked “In what type of library do you work? Academic, Hospital, Public, AHEC, or Other (please specify).” A total of 344 people responded to this question, and the overwhelming majority (282, or 82 percent) classified themselves as an academic or hospital librarian. Five public librarians and eight Area Health Education Centers

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(AHEC) librarians responded as well, leaving 49 people (14 percent) who responded “other.” Among those replying “other,” we received a variety of responses that show how varied health sciences librarians’ roles are; other institutions included association libraries, a community college library, a nursing library, a professional regulatory organization, a state psychiatric center, a non-profit gerontology research institute, and a not-for-profit insurance organization, as well as one institution employing a librarian to do pharmaceutical research and development. So while academic and hospital librarians were most prevalent, the results do demonstrate the numerous different types of organizations in which health sciences librarians may be employed.

As one illustration of this, let’s take a look at the Knoxville Area Health Sciences Library Consortium ([gsm.utmck.edu/library/kahslc/kahslc.htm](http://gsm.utmck.edu/library/kahslc/kahslc.htm)). This 15-member organization’s mission is “to promote better communication, sharing of resources, and continuing education among health sciences librarians in the Knoxville area.” This one consortium includes the Knoxville Public Library, two community colleges, the National Limb Loss Information Center, the Pediatric Library of the East Tennessee Children’s Hospital, and the Oak Ridge National Laboratory Research Libraries—as well as a variety of academic libraries.

If you find yourself in a health sciences setting, consider yourself lucky. You have the unique opportunity to get real experience in an area that many consider too specialized or too difficult to tackle. Once you have that experience, it is worth its weight in gold, whether you decide to stay in the field, move into a different facet of health sciences librarianship, or even move into some other sort of librarianship. If you want to break into the health sciences, the best way to begin is by grabbing every available opportunity to play in the sciences. Volunteer for science liaison areas, join a relevant association, develop research interests in the health sciences, and present papers and publish on health sciences topics. Believe

us when we say that a willingness to tackle health sciences in any way you can will not go unnoticed.

## **Help! My Degree Is in English**

On the survey we also asked “What other degrees do you hold? Please list all degrees, fields, and schools.” The responses reflected a wide range of disciplines, ranging from home economics to folklore. We tallied all the responses that included a bachelor’s degree (300) to determine the most common undergraduate majors among the survey respondents. Here are the results:

- English: 44
- History: 30
- Education: 25
- Biology: 18
- Anthropology: 14
- Psychology: 12
- Business: 8
- Library science: 8
- Nursing: 8

Of the 300 respondents who listed their bachelor’s degrees, 15 percent held undergraduate degrees in English, and 25 percent held a degree in either history or English. Whatever your undergraduate degree is in, don’t let it hinder you from becoming a health sciences librarian.

Both of us have a bachelor’s and a master’s in history (see our paths to health sciences librarianship in “About the Authors” at the end of this book). True, a degree in the sciences will be noticed in the plus column when you apply for jobs—but, just as when applying

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for any library job, multiple factors determine whether you get the job offer. Further, if you do accidentally find yourself in a health sciences position with a degree in English or in history (or in anything else, for that matter), don't feel that this is a hurdle to be overcome. Whatever your background, you bring a unique skill set and personality to the job—so use both to your advantage.

On the survey we also asked if people took a health sciences course in library school. If the answer was no, we asked whether it was because their program didn't offer one, whether they chose not to, or whether the course didn't fit their schedule. We also provided a space for people to respond with "other" reasons. Of the 344 respondents, 146 (42.4 percent) reported that they did take a health sciences course in library school, while 198 (57.6 percent) said they did not. Of those who responded that they didn't take a health sciences class, 92 (46.5 percent) said that no course was offered at their school, 44 (22.2 percent) said they chose not to take the class, 25 (12.6 percent) reported that course didn't fit their schedule, and 37 (18.7 percent) reported some other reason for not taking a health sciences class. So while a library school course in health sciences would certainly be useful, don't let your lack of one stop you from applying for a health sciences job.

### **Don't All Health Sciences Librarians Work in a Hospital or Medical School Library?**

Don't make the mistake of thinking that health sciences librarians only work in libraries attached to a hospital or medical school. Just as health sciences librarians have varied backgrounds, they can also be found in a wide range of settings—and even hospital and academic libraries vary widely. The following sections provide a sampling of some of the settings in which you might find health sciences librarians. While this list is far from exhaustive, it should

give you a sense of how diverse the field of health sciences librarianship really is.

### **Academic Libraries**

While libraries attached to medical schools are definitely academic, a host of other academic health sciences libraries serve all sorts of clienteles. For instance, the Lister Hill Library of the Health Sciences at the University of Birmingham ([www.uab.edu/lister](http://www.uab.edu/lister)) does serve the School of Medicine, but it also serves six other professional schools, the campus, and a hospital, and includes a very well-known historical collection. The four-story library has a staff of more than 40; its atmosphere is very much like that of any large academic library. Another example of a large health sciences library attached to a university is the University of New Mexico Health Sciences Library and Informatics Center ([hsc.unm.edu/library](http://hsc.unm.edu/library)).

On the other hand, the Maguire Medical Library at the Florida State University College of Medicine ([www.med.fsu.edu/library](http://www.med.fsu.edu/library)) can be found in one large room housed within the College of Medicine building and only has a staff of about five. However, Maguire still serves six regional medical campuses and two rural training locations in Florida. Sometimes, regional campuses will also have their own library. For instance, the Huntsville Regional Medical Campus is part of the University of Alabama School of Medicine, and it houses the Sparks Medical Library ([main.uab.edu/uasom/2/show.asp?durki=20025](http://main.uab.edu/uasom/2/show.asp?durki=20025)). The Sparks Library has a staff of two and serves mainly third- and fourth-year medical students and residents. Each medical library, large or small, is designed and staffed to serve the particular needs of its campus. You can find academic health sciences libraries of any size, so you have the option of a number of different work environments.

One main difference between academic health sciences libraries and medical school libraries is that, in a health sciences library that serves a larger academic community, you'll have the

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opportunity to work with a wider variety of students, clinicians, and medical professionals. For instance, we are liaisons to the School of Optometry and the School of Nursing, respectively. We rarely interact with the medical school, but we do encounter students from all over campus—including an occasional English literature student. By contrast, the Greenblatt Library at the Medical College of Georgia ([www.lib.mcg.edu](http://www.lib.mcg.edu)) is strictly a health sciences campus with five professional schools, including graduate programs in medical dosimetry (the measurement and calculation of dosage for the treatment of cancer patients) and medical illustration. You can begin to see just from these few examples how different these health sciences libraries can be, even though they are all called *academic* health sciences libraries.

The vast majority of academic health sciences libraries have their own director and report directly to a university provost or dean (or the dean of or director within the medical school), while a few report to another library director on campus. This can give a health sciences library a good bit of autonomy and the ability to set its own goals and priorities, as its money comes from a separate pot rather than having to be carved out of another library's budget. When interviewing for academic health sciences librarian positions, be sure you know how the library's administration is set up. Ask questions that can give you hints as to how the libraries on a campus interact with each other—especially if your potential boss reports to a director in another library.

Many general academic libraries serve health sciences schools as well. For instance, many community colleges, liberal arts colleges, and universities have nursing, allied health, and other health sciences programs. Keene State College's Mason Library ([www.keene.edu/library](http://www.keene.edu/library)) in New Hampshire supports programs in health sciences, physical education, and athletic training, while the University of North Carolina at Asheville Ramsey Library ([www.lib.unca.edu/library](http://www.lib.unca.edu/library)) has a liaison for health and wellness.

Libraries such as Georgia State University Library ([www.library.gsu.edu](http://www.library.gsu.edu)) in Atlanta serve health programs such as the College of Health and Human Sciences, which includes the School of Nursing, Division of Nutrition, Institute of Public Health, and the Center for Healthy Development.

Some health-oriented academic institutions also have stand-alone libraries. For example, the Galen College of Nursing ([www.galened.com](http://www.galened.com)), the New York University College of Dentistry ([www.nyu.edu/dental](http://www.nyu.edu/dental)), and the New England College of Optometry ([www.neco.edu](http://www.neco.edu)) all have their own libraries. Chiropractic schools, such as the Palmer College of Chiropractic, also maintain libraries. The David D. Palmer Health Sciences Library ([www.palmer.edu/libraryd.aspx](http://www.palmer.edu/libraryd.aspx)), named for the founder of modern chiropractic, contains special collections and archives considered the “most comprehensive chiropractic historical resource in the world.”<sup>1</sup> So health sciences librarians can find themselves in all sorts of academic settings, from small community colleges to huge research universities with hospitals and clinics. If you end up in an academic health sciences library, the key is not to get so overwhelmed by all the health sciences stuff that you ignore the importance of learning about the work environment.

Typical day-to-day tasks for an academic health sciences librarian depend largely on the type and size of the library. Large academic health sciences libraries employ all sorts of librarians, from behind-the-scenes types like systems librarians and catalogers to the reference and instruction people on the front lines. In smaller libraries, most technical services functions may be handled by the main library on campus. For instance, the health sciences staff might develop the library’s collection but send lists of purchases to the main library, whose acquisitions people will do the actual ordering and whose catalogers will enter the books into a shared catalog.

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In any academic setting, be sure you understand the faculty issues and requirements that go along with your job. For instance, at Lister Hill we have faculty rank and status but do not have tenure. At Maguire, librarians have faculty status but no rank or tenure. This all depends on the library and the institution, so just know what you are getting into when you accept the job. You don't want promotion or tenure sneaking up on you! Get a handle on what is required as soon as you can, so that you can start squirreling away documentation and make sure to do everything you need to do to get promoted or be granted tenure. Also ask if any librarians at your institution have appointments in the medical or other schools. In some cases, librarians have become such an integral part of a school that they hold faculty status within that school.

Along these lines, also be sure you understand the service component of your job. Most academic libraries will require some form of professional service. This can include activities such as serving on local, state, or national library association committees or groups, as well as on various committees within the library and/or college. Another component to be aware of is the scholarship requirements of your position. Academic library jobs also require some sort of scholarship, whether this be writing book reviews or articles, presenting posters or papers at a conference, or serving as an editor. It may seem overwhelming at first, but you'll soon settle into a groove.

### **Veterinary Libraries**

Veterinary libraries are another flavor of health sciences libraries. These libraries are often, but not always, attached to a university and sometimes also will be responsible for serving a school's agricultural programs (and hence are sometimes referred to as Ag/Vet libraries). The Veterinary Medical Libraries Section (VMLS; [www.vmls.mlanet.org](http://www.vmls.mlanet.org)) of the Medical Library Association (MLA) is a great place to learn about this facet of health sciences librarianship. VMLS also maintains



a veterinary libraries directory that lists veterinary libraries worldwide ([www.vmls.mlanet.org/vlindex.htm](http://www.vmls.mlanet.org/vlindex.htm)), and its diversity shows that even this one subspecialty has enough variety to keep anyone interested and challenged.

The title of this book is a perfect way to explain my being a veterinary medical librarian. With fewer than 30 veterinary medical schools in the U.S., there are not many opportunities in this field of librarianship. In addition to working at academic institutions, veterinary medical librarians can be found at zoos and wild animal parks, aquariums, veterinary associations, and animal research centers.

The combination of education, experience, luck, and being in the right place at the right time all came together for me. While my formal education and degrees are in the social sciences, I worked as a paraprofessional in an engineering branch library at a large research university. This influenced my desire to learn more and to obtain my master's degree in library science and take science reference courses.

Thirty years later, I've worked at both academic and public libraries. For the majority of that time, I held management positions, supervising librarians, staff, student workers, and volunteers. Given my strong background of experience in the sciences and management, combined with a commitment to user services, when an opening at my institution for the head of a veterinary branch library became available, I leaped at the opportunity to apply. I have now been a veterinary medical librarian since 2003.

A good job allows for a variety of duties, opportunities, growth, and challenges. Within a couple of weeks of starting my new position, I was asked to draw a floor plan to renovate the existing library. Definitely challenging—but also rewarding when you see it all come to fruition. Redesigning a library is not an everyday event, but working with a broad range of library users is. Veterinary librarians serve not only the individuals currently affiliated with their institution but also alums, veterinary practitioners, and animal owners. And, as often found in other areas of medical librarianship, you're often called upon during an emergency or crisis—which can be a life-or-death situation.

Pet owners often visit the library while they wait for a test or other procedures to be performed on their pet, so the importance of a sympathetic, caring library staff cannot be overemphasized. And it's not unusual for one of the surgeons or clinicians to seek us out for information needed in a very short time frame. Because I work at an academic institution with a college of veterinary medicine, I work with DVM [Doctor of Veterinary Medicine] students starting from their first day of library orientation during their first week on campus until their graduation four years later. It's very rewarding to work with the students, from assisting them with their basic introductory courses to helping them with the information they need for their rotations.

The rewards are many in this career. Knowing that the information found through library resources can save someone's pet or that the research done contributes to the overall wellness of humans, as in cancer research, is very satisfying. With their understanding of

disease models, veterinarians also play a vital role in public health. It's the veterinary librarian's role to make sure that practitioners have the right tools at their disposal. The best perk of the job is the veterinarians and DVM students! They're always pleasant to work with, they're quick to say "thank you," and they love and use their libraries.

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For instance, you might find yourself working at a library like the University of Tennessee at Knoxville's Pendergrass Agriculture & Veterinary Medicine Library ([www.lib.utk.edu/agvet](http://www.lib.utk.edu/agvet)). The Pendergrass Library has a staff of about six and "holds the majority of the University Libraries' collections for agriculture, natural and environmental sciences, food sciences, and veterinary medicine."<sup>2</sup> You might, on the other hand, find yourself working at a library such as the University of Georgia's Science Library ([www.libs.uga.edu/science](http://www.libs.uga.edu/science)). Here, you'll find a "broad range of materials in agriculture, biological and life sciences, human and veterinary medicine, mathematics, computer science, physical sciences, engineering and technology" and a staff of more than 20 that also supports the university's College of Veterinary Medicine, Agricultural Experiment Stations, Skidaway Institute of Oceanography, Sapelo Island Marine Institute, and Veterinary Diagnostic Laboratory.<sup>3</sup> Veterinary libraries can narrow their focus even more. For example, the Gluck Equine Research Center Library at the University of Kentucky ([www.ca.uky.edu/gluck/ServLibrary.asp](http://www.ca.uky.edu/gluck/ServLibrary.asp)) deals with everything about horses,

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while the Oregon Health & Science University maintains the Isabel McDonald Library at the Oregon National Primate Research Center ([www.ohsu.edu/library/primate.shtml](http://www.ohsu.edu/library/primate.shtml))—which, of course, focuses on primates.

An academic veterinary library is generally classified as a branch library falling under the directorship of the main library on campus. This usually means that most technical services activities happen in the main library, leaving the veterinary library staff free to focus on such things as collection development, reference, research, and instruction. Again, as with any academic position, make sure you learn the ins and outs of faculty status, tenure, and what is required for promotion.

Not all veterinary libraries are attached to schools. For instance, the Zoological Society of San Diego runs the society's library ([library.sandiegozoo.org](http://library.sandiegozoo.org)), located within the famed San Diego Zoo (seriously, how cool is that?!), while the Baltimore Aquarium houses the A. Carter Middendorf Library ([www.aqua.org](http://www.aqua.org)). For a complete list of zoo and aquarium libraries, see the Directory of Zoo and Aquarium Libraries at [www.nal.usda.gov/awic/zoo/ZooAquaLibDir.htm](http://www.nal.usda.gov/awic/zoo/ZooAquaLibDir.htm). Another interesting veterinary library is the Smithsonian's National Zoological Park (NZIP) Branch Library ([www.sil.si.edu/libraries/nzip](http://www.sil.si.edu/libraries/nzip)). One of 20 libraries that make up the Smithsonian Institution Libraries system, the NZIP Branch Library houses a monograph and serial collection as well as a special collection "of publications from other zoos and aquariums such as animal collection inventories, annual reports, guidebooks and miscellaneous pamphlets," some of which are more than 100 years old.<sup>4</sup> The federal government also runs its share of animal-related libraries, such as the U.S. Department of Agriculture's National Agricultural Library (NAL; [www.nal.usda.gov](http://www.nal.usda.gov)) and smaller entities that fall under the NAL, such as the Animal Welfare Information Center ([awic.nal.usda.gov](http://awic.nal.usda.gov)).

If these examples pique your interest in Ag/Vet libraries, don't be afraid to contact an Ag/Vet librarian and ask about the job. You can browse the list on the VMLS website for contact information and to find Ag/Vet libraries in your area. If you are still in library school, and your university also has a veterinary school, ask about doing an internship or practicum. Doing an internship is the best way to find out if you'll like something and to learn about the day-to-day routine.

### **Area Health Education Centers**

Developed by Congress in 1971, the Area Health Education Centers, or AHEC, program is charged with recruiting, training, and retaining a "health professions workforce committed to underserved populations" by harnessing the resources of academic medicine. There are currently 54 AHEC programs operating more than 200 centers,<sup>5</sup> and the National AHEC Organization (NAO) maintains a directory of AHEC programs at [www.nationalahec.org/Directory/AHECDirectory.asp](http://www.nationalahec.org/Directory/AHECDirectory.asp). By browsing the directory you can see that there is a good deal of variation among these programs. Some don't employ librarians, but a number of them do.

Just a few examples show how each AHEC can be set up differently. The University of Arkansas for Medical Sciences' AHEC program, founded in 1973, highlights its library services: "AHEC Learning Resource Centers supply library resources to programs, institutions, and individuals throughout Arkansas, serving as regional medical and health professional information specialists."<sup>6</sup> These consist of seven different libraries around the state ([www.uams.edu/AHEC/library.asp](http://www.uams.edu/AHEC/library.asp)). Directed by a librarian, the Foothills AHEC program ([www.foothillsahec.org](http://www.foothillsahec.org)) is a partnership between local communities and educators in northeast Georgia, while the North Carolina AHEC Information and Library System ([library.ncahec.net/ILS](http://library.ncahec.net/ILS)) divides the state into nine regions, each with its own AHEC that includes "library and information services

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to support the clinical, educational, and research activities of regional health professionals and students.”<sup>7</sup> North Carolina also provides the AHEC Digital Library (ADL; [library.ncahec.net](http://library.ncahec.net)). Both institutions and individuals can purchase a membership to the ADL; an individual membership is \$150 per year as of 2009.<sup>8</sup>

AHECs vary widely, as they are born out of the specific needs of a geographical area—and may or may not include librarians on their teams. Requirements in the job ads for AHEC librarians similarly vary, but outreach, reference, and instruction are generally important components. One typical ad, for instance, states that the “librarian’s primary responsibility is the administration of an ... outreach project providing library services and training to public health professionals in the region.” The introduction to the North Florida AHEC ([www.northfloridaahec.org](http://www.northfloridaahec.org)) sums it up nicely:

We’re not neurologists.

But we strengthen minds every day.

We’re not cardiologists.

But we inspire the hearts of caregivers.

We’re not optometrists.

But we help the medically underserved see a brighter  
future.<sup>9</sup>

### **Hospital Libraries, Veterans Affairs Medical Libraries, and Patient Education Libraries**

As with all the other types of libraries we’ve looked at, libraries attached to hospitals can vary greatly. Most are small in terms of both space and personnel; often they are staffed by a solo librarian who is responsible for the entire operation. Due to space limitations, hospital libraries generally focus on having a lean, mean, core collection of materials and providing electronic access to the most current and relevant resources. This fits in nicely with the needs of their clientele, who tend to be very busy healthcare practitioners and clinicians. They want the most current information,

they want it delivered to their computer or handheld device—and they want it now! The scope of a hospital library's collection and services should match the goals and mission of the organization to which it is attached. For instance, a teaching hospital's library will need resources geared toward students as well as practitioners and clinicians.

Along the same lines, the organizational structure of a hospital library's parent institution can pose some interesting challenges for hospital librarians—libraries can literally fall anywhere within the hospital's hierarchy. If you work in a hospital library attached to a university hospital, you may find yourself reporting to two bosses—one in the hospital and one in the parent library. While having a stake in two larger entities may give the library a bit more security, reporting to two bosses gets tricky. It's important to realize that, no matter whom you directly report to, you should work to create a good pool of library advocates from all over the hospital. Be aware and flexible when opportunities arise to make both the library and yourself visible and valuable.

Some things to know: If you find yourself working in a hospital library, you will sooner or later hear about the Joint Commission ([www.jointcommission.org](http://www.jointcommission.org)), formerly the Joint Commission on Accreditation of Healthcare Organizations. The Joint Commission's mission is “to continuously improve health care for the public, in collaboration with other stakeholders, by evaluating health care organizations and inspiring them to excel in providing safe and effective care of the highest quality and value.”<sup>10</sup> Accreditation is voluntary, so make sure you find out whether your hospital is seeking or maintaining accreditation status. In any medical setting, you will also most definitely hear the term *HIPAA* thrown about. HIPAA, which stands for the Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act, is discussed in depth in Chapter 3. Technology and electronic access issues can also be especially problematic for

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hospital libraries behind tightly guarded firewalls, so for more on technology, see Chapter 4.

If you are looking for more information on hospital libraries, check out MLA's active Hospital Libraries Section ([www.hls.mlanet.org/organization](http://www.hls.mlanet.org/organization)), as well as its wiki ([mla-hls.wiki.spaces.com](http://mla-hls.wiki.spaces.com)). You can also browse the internet for examples of the variety of hospital libraries, but keep in mind that hospital library websites may either be really small or buried within a hospital's larger site. For instance, the St. Luke's Cornwall Hospital website ([www.stlukescornwallhospital.org](http://www.stlukescornwallhospital.org)) doesn't even provide a direct link to the library from the hospital's main page; visitors have to select the "Health Links" button, then scroll to the end of the list to see "Medical Library" ([www.slchlibrary.org](http://www.slchlibrary.org)). The El Camino Hospital, however, links to its Health Library and Resource Center ([www.elcaminohospital.org/Patient\\_Services/Health\\_Library](http://www.elcaminohospital.org/Patient_Services/Health_Library)) on its main page under the section titled "About Us." The Health Library and Resource Center is a bit more visible because the hospital is advertising the library as a "free community resource open to the public" as well as serving the healthcare practitioners and clinicians within the hospital.<sup>11</sup> See the next section of this chapter for more on consumer health services librarians.

Health sciences librarians are also found in the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) libraries. The American Library Association established the VA Library Service during World War I, and then in 1923 the service was absorbed into the Veterans Bureau, predecessor to the VA. According to the VA Library Network (VALNET; [www1.va.gov/valnet](http://www1.va.gov/valnet)), VA libraries "provide knowledge-based information for clinical and management decision-making, research, and education."<sup>12</sup>

Like other hospital libraries, VA libraries may be staffed by just one or two people. Depending on the mission of the main institution, the size and scope of VA libraries vary greatly, as do the activities in which librarians are involved. VA librarians provide services



to veterans and their families, as well as clinicians, residents, and students, and perform diverse activities, from attending morning reports or staff meetings to performing database searches and providing education sessions to both patients and medical staff. Many libraries, like the Patient Education Resource Center ([www.houston.va.gov/PatientEd/perc.asp](http://www.houston.va.gov/PatientEd/perc.asp)) at the Michael E. DeBakey VA Medical Center in Houston, Texas, have placed some information resources online. The VA Long Beach Healthcare System also provides a webpage with library information and a link to its catalog ([www.longbeach.va.gov/Our\\_Services/library.asp](http://www.longbeach.va.gov/Our_Services/library.asp)).

VALNET maintains a list of consumer health resources, including information on health literacy, information therapy, post-traumatic stress disorder, and traumatic brain injuries. Librarians also publish a bibliography of resources on “VA priority areas” such as end-of-life care, chemical and biological terrorism, and pain management. Several documents and example policies are available on the VALNET site for VA librarians, so this is a good place to start when looking for information and resources on patient computer use, how to evaluate electronic resources, and how to prove the value of a library.

Medical school students learn the saying, “When you hear hoofbeats, think horses, not zebras.” This means that when presented with a set of symptoms, doctors are taught to focus on the most common possibility. Sometimes, though, it *is* a zebra making those hoofbeats. Even though we’ve continually talked about the variety among hospital libraries, there are some that are zebras. Hospital libraries can be found not just in hospital facilities themselves but in a variety of places, including prisons, military bases, and more. For instance, there are circuit librarians who travel to rural hospitals without individual libraries in order to provide library services such as interlibrary loan, literature searches, and help with technology. Many medical departments, like the Department of Ophthalmology or the Department of Surgery, will have separate

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departmental libraries. Even under the one umbrella of hospital librarianship, you can find a great deal of variety and opportunity.

### Consumer Health Libraries

Consumer health librarians can be found in academic, hospital, or public libraries as well as in consumer health and patient education libraries. As we mentioned in the introduction, though, any librarian who comes in contact with the public has the potential to get consumer health questions. These can range from “What does MRSA stand for?” (the answer is methicillin-resistant *Staphylococcus aureus*) to heart-wrenching questions about a loved one who has just been diagnosed with a terminal illness. Knowing where to find consumer health information and making contact with consumer health librarians can help you immensely when confronted with such questions. Just remember that you can’t practice medicine (see Chapter 3 for more information on ethics).

The MLA’s Consumer and Patient Health Information Section (CAPHIS; [caphis.mlanet.org/consumer](http://caphis.mlanet.org/consumer)) defines consumer health as “an umbrella term encompassing the continuum extending from the specific information needs of patients to the broader provision of health information for the lay person.”<sup>13</sup> The National Network of Libraries of Medicine (NN/LM; [nmlm.gov](http://nmlm.gov)) sums up consumer health information nicely:

Consumer health information is simply health or medical information produced or intended for people who are not health professionals. Consumer health information helps people to understand their health and make health-related decisions for themselves or someone else. It also includes information about prevention and wellness. Consumer health information can be found anywhere from pharmacies, grocery stores, and health food stores, to bookstores, physicians offices, libraries, and of course, the World Wide Web.<sup>14</sup>

In other words, consumer health is about turning “pharmaceutical mechanization” into “how this drug works.”

Given today’s proliferation of available health information, consumer health and patient information libraries are especially important. Consumer health librarians are active in promoting health literacy and providing health information. In “The Librarian’s Role in the Provision of Consumer Health Information and Patient Education,” CAPHIS outlines the many tasks in which these types of librarians may be involved. As in any library, these activities include collection management, knowledge and resource sharing, advocacy, access, and dissemination of information, education, and research. Consumer health librarians are also engaged in planning seminars and education programs, sharing resources, partnering with community organizations to establish health information events, speaking on various issues, and more.

Some consumer health examples include the Eskind Biomedical Library at Vanderbilt Medical Center’s Consumer Health Digital Library ([www.mc.vanderbilt.edu/vumcdiglib/subjres.html?diglib=6](http://www.mc.vanderbilt.edu/vumcdiglib/subjres.html?diglib=6)). In addition to providing access to consumer health resources such as MedlinePlus, the library links to medical dictionaries, encyclopedias, and evidence-based patient information and provides a consumer health resources news channel. In 1985, the University of Connecticut Health Center established a consumer health program, Healthnet ([library.uchc.edu/departm/hnet/about.html](http://library.uchc.edu/departm/hnet/about.html)), for Connecticut residents and public libraries. As a “librarian to librarian outreach program,” Healthnet librarians provide training to public librarians and consumers on how to locate health information, in addition to other activities such as creating public awareness programs and resource guides for both consumers and librarians.<sup>15</sup> The PlaneTree Health Library ([www.planetreesanjose.org](http://www.planetreesanjose.org)) in Los Gatos, California, around since 1989, features a book, journal, and audiovisual collection and an on-site bookstore. The library also sponsors health

So, how does someone with a very limited understanding of human biology—as well as a definite squeamishness around even photos of blood and body parts—end up as a medical/consumer health librarian? Well, serendipity helps, as does having the “confidence of the ignorant” (Orson Welles). I first considered medical librarianship after having been a government documents librarian in the local public library for a few years; when a friend retired from her hospital librarian position, I asked her about the job. She proceeded to tell me all about it, including her degrees in relevant sciences as well as the required MLS. I thought about my own undergraduate career in liberal arts with a major in avoiding biology and chemistry at all costs and decided against applying for my friend’s erstwhile position at the hospital.

However, a few years later another hospital librarian friend decided to leave her position when her husband got a job out of state. For some reason, this friend looked at me in my public library reference job and thought I would be the perfect replacement for her. She then recruited me with many idealized portraits of the marvels of clinical librarianship as well as much flattery about my own librarian skills. In no time, I was primed for a major job change. The career path switch wasn’t exactly smooth, however. My initial visions of a warm family of dedicated colleagues in my new hospital environment (including handsome, George Clooney-like doctors to flirt with) were soon dispelled by an army of demanding, time-challenged healthcare workers who were none too patient with my feverish attempts to learn to search MEDLINE on the fly.

Furthermore, I soon discovered that the hospital business could be brutal. In my two years at this particular hospital, I went through three vice president bosses, each of whom was laid off or otherwise “relocated” for some obscure administrative reason. (I seriously began to wonder if it were the Mafia rather than the Baptists running the place.) Eventually, however, I found my groove in the job, and it got even better when I moved to an academic medical library at a local university. By taking advantage of whatever CE [continuing education] opportunities were available, and through simple environmental exposure, I gradually came to a fair command of medical terminology and the finer points of MEDLINE, as well as several other health and science databases. With the support of my newer, more stable administration at the academic medical library, I started a cooperative consumer health information service with my old colleagues at the public libraries, a service that has since grown to serve the entire state and is an affiliate of the National Library of Medicine’s MedlinePlus “Go Local” initiative. I love this work!

Moral of the story? I suppose it’s that the “confidence of the ignorant” can truly become the confidence of the competent for even the least likely candidates among us—and I’m living proof of that!

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lectures at local libraries and a monthly book club. The New York University (NYU) Health Sciences Libraries maintains three consumer health libraries: the Health & Education Resource Center ([www.nyupatientlibrary.org/cancer](http://www.nyupatientlibrary.org/cancer)) for the NYU Cancer Institute, the Patient and Family Resource Center ([www.nyupatientlibrary.org/medcenter](http://www.nyupatientlibrary.org/medcenter)) for the NYU Langone Medical Center, and the Family Health Resource Center & Patient Library ([www.nyupatientlibrary.org/hassenfeld](http://www.nyupatientlibrary.org/hassenfeld)) for the Children's Center for Cancer and Blood Disorders. All of these libraries provide patient handouts, links to reliable health websites, and tips on finding and evaluating online health information.

### **Learning Resource Centers and Simulation Labs**

Other interesting settings where you might find a health sciences librarian include learning resource centers (LRCs) and simulation labs. An LRC may be part of a library or something totally separate; simulation labs may fall under the LRC umbrella but can also be totally separate. For example, Mercer University has the Mercer Medical Library and the Peyton T. Anderson Learning Resources Center ([medicine.mercer.edu/library\\_home](http://medicine.mercer.edu/library_home)). The Mercer website clearly outlines the different services offered by the library and the LRC. Library services include things like literature searches, reference services, reserves, interlibrary loan, and the like, while LRC services focus on providing audiovisual and computer equipment as well as a wet lab.<sup>16</sup>

In addition to the Mayo Clinic's library system, one of the largest in the world, the Mayo Medical School has an LRC ([www.mayo.edu/mms/learning-resource-center.html](http://www.mayo.edu/mms/learning-resource-center.html)). It defines the LRC as "a library facility that supports the medical school curriculum" and that has "a small, carefully selected collection of current medical textbooks. It also provides audiovisual materials, anatomical models and computer-aided educational programs. Several special collections are available including: women's issues in medicine and

health; medical education; examination review books and other selected ethics and humanities materials.”<sup>17</sup>

### **Historical Collections**

One of the most fascinating areas of health sciences librarianship is the various health- and medical-related historical collections. The most well-known history of medicine collection, and one of the world’s largest, is the National Library of Medicine’s History of Medicine collection ([www.nlm.nih.gov/hmd](http://www.nlm.nih.gov/hmd)). Another example is the David D. Palmer Health Sciences Library of the Palmer College of Chiropractic (mentioned previously as a standalone academic library), which is the most thorough chiropractic historical resource available. Lister Hill Library of the Health Sciences has a historical collections department consisting of the University Archives, the Alabama Museum of the Health Sciences, and the Reynolds Historical Library, which contains more than 13,000 rare books, including 30 incunabula as well as an extensive collection on Civil War medicine ([www.uab.edu/reynolds](http://www.uab.edu/reynolds)). The Michigan State University Libraries’ Special Collections houses one of the largest veterinary medical collections in the world ([spc.lib.msu.edu/html/materials/collections/vetmed\\_coll.jsp](http://spc.lib.msu.edu/html/materials/collections/vetmed_coll.jsp)). Positions in these libraries will most likely require a second degree in history or another appropriate degree. If you find yourself working in (and enjoying your job at) a health sciences library but are also interested in history, MLA has a History of the Health Sciences section ([www.mla-hhss.org](http://www.mla-hhss.org)) you can join to learn more—and the connections you make may lead to a new job.

### **Conclusion**

The preceding sections provide just a glimpse into the kaleidoscope that is health sciences librarianship. Clearly it is a diverse and dynamic field. But what do other librarians have to say about the

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profession? On the survey, we asked, “What do you love about being a health sciences librarian?” “What are your *least* favorite things about health sciences librarianship?” and “What are the greatest challenges for health sciences librarianship today?” Comments ranged from thoughtful and heartfelt to just plain hysterical. Overall, though, a number of common themes emerged (for a sampling of comments, see Appendix B at the end of this book).

Responses to the question “What do you love about being a health sciences librarian?” overwhelmingly focused on helping people and making a difference in people’s lives. Another popular response revolved around having new challenges every day. The question “What are your *least* favorite things about health sciences librarianship?” also revealed some overarching themes. Many responses centered around the broad issue of recognition—whether concerning low salaries, having to justify the library, or just a general frustration that people don’t know what librarians have to offer. Diminishing budgets and the rising cost of materials and resources were also common themes. The responses to “What are the greatest challenges for health sciences librarianship today?” parallel the responses to the least favorite things about health sciences librarianship. A number of responses involved the survival of libraries as the greatest challenge today, while others focused on technology issues as the greatest challenge. Overall, there were no big surprises in any of the responses, and most were positive about the profession as a whole.

### Endnotes

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