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Bringing back the librarian, Part Three

Richard A. Lyders

Houston Academy of Medicine-Texas Medical Center Library

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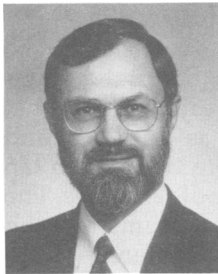
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PRESIDENT'S PAGE

Bringing back the librarian, part three



This is the last of my President's Pages for the *Bulletin* in which I have been exploring the role of the Medical Library Association

(MLA) in supporting the role of the librarian. The theme of my presidential year is to refocus the association's energies on Goal II of our strategic plan, which addresses the health information services professional. Goal II states, "MLA is dedicated to improving health through professional excellence and leadership of its members in the creation and provision of information services and educational programs for health information users" [1]. In my first President's Page, I addressed this issue from the standpoint of three of the association's advocacy committees [2]. In the second, I addressed it from the standpoint of four committees involved in education, professional development, and professional recognition [3]. In this final President's Page, I address the issue in relation to MLA's publications activities.

Again, I asked the chairs of specific MLA committees to help me by responding to the following question: From your perspective, what can MLA do through its publications to enhance the professional role of the librarian as it relates to Goal II?

Carolyn Lipscomb stresses the role of the Publications Committee "to ensure that the Association's publication program advances the efforts of its members" [4]. She points out that

Publications play a role in a number of the strategies outlined in the original Strategic Plan for Goal II, serving

as a clearinghouse for information, monitoring and forecasting trends, promoting the role of health information professionals as experts in evaluation and synthesis of health information, providing educational opportunities for members, and providing a forum for the advancement of state-of-the-art knowledge.

In most cases, monographs, journals and newsletter articles, DockIts, and other publications will inform and educate members to assist them in developing and offering services and programs to health information users. Increasingly, however, publications may be selectively marketed to health information users themselves to guide them in the management of information. Publications also support the Association in defining and advocating roles for the information professional.

In coordination with the other publications-related committees and editors, the Publications Committee can support the accomplishment of Goal II through its efforts to ensure that quality control mechanisms are in place for all publications, to work toward generating revenue through identified publications, to increase marketing and promotion of publications, and to foster member participation in the publication program.

The *MLA News* Evaluation Committee in particular, says Ellen Cooper,

is interested in the issue raised in Goal II because the *MLA News* is one of the primary means of communication among the membership, the MLA board, and the MLA Headquarters staff. As one of two official publications of the organization, it also represents MLA and its members to the public [5].

She points out that all association members "would benefit from an enhanced professional role for the librarian, not only the image, but the role of the librarian needs to be the focus." The *MLA News* Evaluation Committee plays a strong role in this through its

recommendations on the content and format of the publication based on information it collects. In addition, the Committee explores ways the *MLA News* is viewed and used (or not used) by health information users who are not health sciences librarians: How it fits into the overall literature of the health sciences and what unique contribution it can make to the provision of information to health information users.

The *Bulletin* Evaluation Committee also plays a key role in keeping the focus of this publication on the issues of the day, which certainly include the role of the health information services professional. We know that the *Bulletin* is the key communication tool for the profession, both to MLA members and to those outside the field. It is therefore crucial that the *Bulletin* address current issues to the profession in ways that add to our professional understanding and knowledge.

Debra Ketchell of the committee says that the *Bulletin* "serves as a vehicle to model successful librarian roles in the new climate of the 'shared' arena of biomedical information systems and medical informatics" [6]. She raises the issue of "how to" versus "theory" articles in the *Bulletin*. She relates that, in her experience in focus group studies on this issue, they noted that *Bulletin* articles are a good way to find out information about starting a new program, but that "more how to and less theory was desired." Similarly, she believes the profession would benefit from more articles about the hospital and technical services. She concludes that

if we can provide the leadership both in fostering publication and research among members, highlight what is going on in other arenas that affect us—such as medical informatics, computer

systems, and non-medical libraries—and present practical articles that allow members to provide better, faster, and more relevant service to users, then I think the *Bulletin* can make a difference [to the profession].”

The Books Panel is another arm of the association's publications program. Its principal charge is to solicit and propose ideas for new book publications. Daniel Richards, a past chair of the panel, responded with the following well-thought-out statement about the role of the panel in relation to the role of the health information services professional:

MLA's Books Panel has both a direct and a supporting interest in the issue of creation and provision of information services and educational programs for health information users. This interest is evident in the types of books and range of publications which the Books Panel sees through to publication. The DocKit program, for example, provides an excellent opportunity for members in all types of medical libraries to share with colleagues descriptions of information services and educational programs which they have developed in their particular setting. In a similar way, the Panel identifies topics and encourages the writing of monographs in the information services and educational programs, the most recent examples being *Educational Services in Special Libraries: Planning and Administration* by Zachert, and Hannigan & Brown's *Managing Public Access Microcomputers in Health Sciences Libraries*. By identifying related topics and encouraging MLA members to assume responsibility for compilation of DocKits and preparation of manuscripts, the Books Panel makes a fundamental contribution to the enhancement of the professional role of the librarian. Through the publication of works which promote the sharing of experience and the development of creative approaches to issues facing medical libraries, MLA currently enhances the professional excellence and leadership of its members in the creation and provision of improved and higher quality infor-

mation services and educational programs for health professionals.

For the future, MLA can assist medical librarians in cultivating strengths and skills in several areas, particularly those associated with IAIMS. Rachael Anderson in her 1989 Janet Doe Lecture stated that projections of what strengths and skills librarians will need are based on three assumptions: continuing advancements in information technology, growing recognition of the importance of information as a resource, and proliferating applications of information science in health-related disciplines, or medical informatics [7].

The medical librarian of the future, for example, must be prepared to assume a greater role as a filterer and interpreter of medical information, to make distinctions about relevance, quality and applicability of biomedical information in clinical, research and educational settings. The increasing availability of information in electronic formats will provide increased opportunities for medical librarians to become filterers and interpreters. The librarian's reluctance to take on this role has many facets, and I don't suggest that the Books Panel or even MLA can resolve all of them. I do feel, however, that we can play a substantive role through the publications program and through CE courses to provide opportunities for development and enhancement of skills in literature analysis. How do we access quality in biomedical literature? How can an article or book be analyzed to determine if its information content is useful or valid? How do we recognize redundancy in literature? How do we assess the relevance of information to an information need?

There are currently few programs or publications which provide guidance in developing such skills as those called for by Anderson. MLA can develop an agenda around each of them and provide direction and guidance to many of its programs, committees, and publications as appropriate. The Books Panel can develop a list of potential topics, recommend the type of publication which might best suit the topic, and mount an aggressive campaign to identify authors or groups of authors to develop manuscripts. The Panel can also undertake a review of other li-

brary literature to identify and publicize works which might have applicability to skill enhancement in health sciences settings [8].

In the fall of 1991, the Board of Directors endorsed a long-term goal for the association to focus its energies and resources on advocating the role and value of the health information professional. This is a necessary step for the profession in light of the competition in information access and delivery. Similarly, the American Library Association Special Committee on Library School Closings has recommended to the ALA Council that ALA initiate an action program that will

recast the image of the function of library and information science as vital to society in the information age; and to influence the direction of library and information science education in the modern age [9].

Our profession is at a crossroads, facing many challenges. Certainly the profession is changing. The development of our profession can only be reactionary if we are not able to get on top of the issues, take them in, and make them ours. To do this we must be the ones who define what we do. We cannot let ourselves be defined by others. We must take control of our profession so that its future is our decision, not what someone else might want. The board is working on this. Our committees are working on it. Through our association in MLA we can speak with the power of one strong voice. The issue is serious. The times are critical. Only extraordinary steps will work for us now. The very future of our profession is at stake.

*Richard A. Lyders
Houston Academy of Medicine—
Texas Medical Center Library
Houston, Texas*

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