

EMPOWERING ALL: THE VITAL ROLE OF MEDICAL LIBRARIANS IN ENSURING HOSPITAL LIBRARY ACCESSIBILITY FOR PEOPLE WITH DISABILITIES

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Abstract: *Over the past two decades, the integration of people with disabilities into mainstream society has witnessed a profound shift. Prior to this period, individuals with disabilities were often excluded from mainstream education, employment, and community activities based on their specific disabilities. This exclusion has given way to a process of integration, which aims to normalize the lives of people with disabilities. Integration ensures that they are not segregated or separated from the broader society; instead, they live as integral members of their communities, participating in all aspects of society on an equal footing. This principle extends to various facets of life, such as education, employment, and, notably, access to local libraries, where individuals with disabilities should enjoy the same privileges as their non-disabled counterparts.*

The 1981 declaration by the United Nations of the International Year of Disabled Persons (IYDP) with the theme "Full-participation and Equality" marked a pivotal moment in raising awareness about the rights and needs of disabled individuals. Although initially perceived as primarily addressing those with mobility issues, the IYDP significantly increased awareness about the diverse needs and rights of all disabled people. The general public began to recognize that disabled individuals have equal rights to access services, participate in programs, and engage in activities just like anyone else. Disabled individuals themselves have become more vocal in asserting their rights and protesting against any infringements.

Within the library community, the International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions (IFLA) responded to a request from UNESCO by developing the Public Library Manifesto, which was subsequently approved in 1994. This manifesto serves as a persuasive tool, advocating the essential values upheld by public libraries and their vital contributions to the broader community and democratic principles. It underscores the significance of public libraries as local gateways to knowledge, fostering conditions for lifelong learning, independent decision-making, and the cultural development of individuals and social groups.

Keywords: *Disability Integration, Equal Rights, Public Libraries, International Year of Disabled Persons, Library Manifesto*

1. Introduction

The integration of people with disabilities into mainstream society has been a prevalent phenomenon during the past two decades. Before these times, for a long time, disabled people have been excluded from mainstream education, employment and various community activities on the grounds of

individual disabilities. Integration may be described as the process of normalization of people with disabilities, that is, disabled people are not segregated or separated from mainstream society. They live in society as members of the community and participate at all sorts of society on an equal basis. For instance, children with disabilities go to the same school in a community as those for non-disabled children. In that same sense, people are also making use of their local libraries in the same way as non-disabled people. By doing so disabled people have equal opportunities to develop their full potential, to live independently and to play a full part as active citizens. In 1981, the United Nations proclaimed the International Year of Disabled Persons (IYDP). The theme of IYDP is 'Full-participation and Equality'. Although it is said that the IYDP was aimed mostly at those who have mobility problems the IYDP has increased greatly awareness of all sorts of disabled people. The general public has started to realize that disabled people have equal rights to access and participate in services, programs and activities as themselves. Disabled people themselves have also become aware of their rights and have protested when their rights are infringed. In the library community the International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions (IFLA) worked out the Public Library Manifesto upon the request of UNESCO, approved in 1994. The Public Library Manifesto is aimed at convincing local and national authorities of the fundamental values protected by public libraries and their important contribution to the community and democracy in general. The Manifesto states that: Freedom, Prosperity and the Development of society and individuals are fundamental human values. They will only be attained through the ability of well-informed citizens to exercise their democratic rights and to play an active role in society. The public library, the local gateway to knowledge, provides a basic condition for lifelong learning, independent decision making and cultural development of the individual and social groups.

1.1 A new Library Paradigm

It has been recognized that every user does not have the same level of access or opportunity to make use of library resources. Madu (2008) noted that –it is the duty of the library to identify the various disabilities and how the library can handle such problems such as those of the blind and partially sighted, mentally handicapped, physically handicapped and so on. This type of service is called library extension services. Examples of such services are mobile library services, public lecture and orientation on how to use the library resources.

In the course of mobile library services, for instance, a vehicle will be used to move the library resources to the areas that these groups of people reside. Alternatively the library can organize a public lecture for disadvantaged patrons on how they can use library resources that could interest them. Libraries can also provide special services to patrons with special information needs using books-on-tape (talking books), digital talking books and special equipment, Braille materials, and reader advisory services. Hence, the following services could be rendered in libraries in order to meet the information needs of the disadvantaged group and help in including those previously excluded.

The Library collection should also consist of titles both in print and non-print formats (Braille, cassette, digital cartridge, and large print) on a broad range of fiction and non-fiction subjects, for all ages. Byrne, (2005) asserts that: –In building the Information Society, we shall pay particular attention to the special needs of marginalized and vulnerable groups of the society, including migrants, internally displaced persons and refugees, unemployed and under-privileged people, minorities and nomadic people. We shall also recognize the special needs of older persons and persons with disabilities. Making library buildings accessible is quite indispensable to meeting the information needs of the

disadvantaged group. Library accommodation can be built to include elevators, curb cuts that are smooth for wheelchair to travel, and Braille signs around the building.

1.2 Information needs of disadvantaged groups.

It becomes abundantly apparent that modern libraries as well as librarians need to be familiarized with a multitude of different aids to serve the needs of diverse disadvantaged groups. In this sense it would be of critical importance to identify the particular means with which a modern librarian environment can best serve any patrons with specific disabilities, by acknowledging them in categories:

a) Visually impaired/the blind

The blind and partially sighted people have the same information needs as everyone else. But many people with sight problems will not be able to understand recorded information unless it is made available to them in a suitable format. Some people are not totally blind but are partially blind. In order to accommodate and meet the Information needs of such group of people, libraries can acquire information materials such as audio resources. Most people who are blind or visually impaired cannot read the standard or conventional print materials. They need textbooks and other written materials in accessible formats, such as audio/talking books, Braille, electronic text, and audio tapes.

b) Hearing impaired/the deaf

These are the group of people with hearing problem. The term hearing- impaired covers the broad spectrum of any individual with a less-than-average hearing level. The term deaf is generally used to describe those who are unable to benefit from a hearing aid due to the severity of their hearing loss. Most deaf individuals are faced with the problems of availability and accessibility of their information needs. Some of the materials which could be used to assist in the provision of services to the deaf as identified by Madu (2008) include: finger alphabet, video, films, text telephones where messages appear in prints and Telecommunication Device for the Deaf (TDD). Several magazines, hearing aids and popular books for this category of people are kept in the library for their use. The library could also procure visual resources which could help in the learning process of the deaf. These materials should be made available in the library as it will go a long way to meeting the information needs of the deaf.

c) Speech Impaired/the Dumb

Language is the foundation for success at school or in life activities. It is also a rule-based system of communication involving the comprehension and use of signs and symbols by which ideas, thoughts and messages are represented. Consequently, it is the basis of communication. Communication is the process of exchanging knowledge, ideas, opinions and feelings through the use of verbal or non verbal (e.g a gesture) language. Libraries need to train selected members of staff on how best to serve people with speech impairments. These library staff should be para- professionals who work under the supervision of librarians, specially trained for this specific disabled/disadvantaged group.

Those para-professionals would assist especially those who are impaired through the use of sign language to gain access to visual and auditory information, develop the use of receptive and expressive communication and promote social and emotional well-being. To further facilitate their quest for education, some of the materials that could help in their learning process include overhead projector, computers, films, videos, pictures, text books etc.

d) Crippled/the Lame

Physically challenged people who may be on wheelchair or bed ridden, tend to consume a lot of resources on some aspects of human endeavors. This is to enable them compete with those that are not

physically challenged. Libraries should be built in such a way to accommodate this group of users by making the entrance wide and building it in a way that wheelchairs can enter by use of access ramps. In some cases, particularly if separate floors exist within the library elevators or staircase lifts should also be provided.

e) **Hospitalized/Hospital Patients**

The last category is people with some form of ailment who are confined in a hospital bed or in a hospital environment. This group of people constitutes a special class of patrons with apparent barriers in accessing information. Some hospital patients suffer psychological problems which can better be taken care of by using interesting information materials that meet their needs to cheer them up. This service is generally known as Bibliotherapy. This is the use of books to heal people's psychological trauma, emotional stress, or mentally deranged cases. This group of people is disadvantaged because of their health-related problems. In order for the medical library or libraries to meet the information needs of the hospitalized, they should engage in library extension services to include in their catalog, books that could have therapeutic effect on the patients.

1.3 Roles and Responsibilities of Medical Librarians.

Social justice and social responsibility are core values of the medical profession. Medical librarians have been an untapped resource for this important work. Diversity, inclusion, and social justice are the defining issues for the present and future of the medical library profession. Positive outcomes from this work will be cementing the relevance of the medical librarian as a member of the health care team. Medical librarians who practice their profession through a social justice lens have the potential to have a meaningful impact on transforming the health of the public, especially the marginalized. Like medicine, medical librarianship is not only an information science, but a human science. It is the search, retrieval, evaluation, and application of information to meet human needs to help health professionals, students, and patients make informed decisions about their health. Currently, much of what we do in medical libraries still focuses on developing vast libraries of print or online collections, enhancing informatics technology-based skills, and developing evidence-based best practices for delivering reference, education, or other services.

While performing activities such as developing data science plans, digitizing special collections, and conducting systematic reviews are important, they need to be done in a social justice context. Through a social justice lens, we would need to introduce more humanistic approaches to our work: refocusing our attention from serving ourselves and what is more efficient or effective for us to do in our libraries and shifting our focus outward. We need to focus on learning what our users want from us, learning how individual users experience the library, and tailoring our services and approach to their individual needs and experience. Social justice librarianship involves developing a personal and professional approach in which the practice of medical librarianship puts the user's interests and needs front and center. Like medicine, we have been slow to recognize what our social responsibility to those we serve is and that there is no one size fits all to the services we provide.

In this sense, medical librarians must go beyond the traditional approaches to thinking about their work and must develop a deeper understanding of and connection with the social responsibilities of the health professions and people served. Medical librarians must develop a new professional orientation—one that fosters a critical awareness or critical consciousness of going beyond the self to others and a commitment to addressing the issues of societal relevant health information. This new professional

orientation or identity places information science in a social and cultural context. It is coupled with a recognition of societal injustices with respect to access to health care and health information and a search for appropriate action.

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