The role of the health librarian: ways of working towards professional recognition in the Australian health workforce

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Introduction
Health Libraries Australia (HLA) is the national health group within the Australian Library and Information Association (ALIA), representing librarians and information professionals working in all health sectors. It was formed in May 2001 out of the Medical Librarians Section of the then named Library Association of Australia. The vision of HLA is that all Australians benefit from health library and information professionals’ expertise that is integral to evidence-based health care. Since its inception, HLA has worked to develop a highly skilled and professional workforce with the capacity to deliver services and resources that support quality clinical care, comprehensive education and ongoing professional development for health professionals, and robust health and medical research. This article will discuss the role that health librarians play in delivering such services and how HLA has advocated for professional recognition as one of the health information professions.

Evolution of medical and health librarianship
Medical libraries and medical librarians have existed for a very long time. An early article in the journal Medical Libraries referred to the Pennsylvania Hospital founded in 1751 as having the oldest public medical library in America (Jackson, 1898). Another article in the same journal described the aims of the authors as being firstly, “to encourage founding of Medical Libraries and Medical Departments in Public Libraries, wherever the medical profession is fairly organised” and secondly, “to encourage the compilation of union catalogues of medical books and periodicals” (Statistics of Medical Libraries, 1898).

Index Medicus, a comprehensive bibliographic index of scientific journal articles focusing on medical science, was first published in 1879 and continued in print format until 2004. The National Library of Medicine began computerising this indexing work in the 1960s by creating MEDLARS, a bibliographic database that became MEDLINE. Index Medicus thus became the print presentation of the MEDLINE database’s content but was eventually supplanted by PubMed, which continues to include the Index as a subset of the journals it covers.

Lindsay Harris’s history of South Australian hospital libraries 1956-1980 (Harris, 2016) referred to the use by university medical librarians and hospital librarians of the Quarterly Index Medicus for conducting manual literature searches. Other services conducted by these early Australian hospital librarians included weekly circulation of contents pages from lists of received journals, the photocopying of requested articles for users, general reference queries and the loan of library materials, often on an honour system. Library users included medical staff, university research staff and students but noticeably absent were nursing staff, who in some instances had their own library services. Interestingly, it is noted in Harris’s article (2016: 97) that while the State Library of South Australia recognised professional librarians, hospital administrators did not clearly understand their role and this, as well as indirect reporting lines, were sometimes problematic for decision making.

The tools for literature searching have evolved from print indexes such as Index Medicus to mediated information retrieval systems such as Dialog in the 1970s and 1980s, to locally hosted databases on CD-ROM from the mid-1990s until the mid-2000s. Online access for subscribed users is now universally available and the librarian’s role has changed markedly in that users can now conduct their own searches. However, there is an ever increasing role for health librarians, as busy practitioners and academics often do not have time or the expert skills required to conduct robust searches; nor do they have the time to keep up-to-date with developments such as new types of information tools, improvements in platform functionality, and changes in content of particular databases and resources.

The role of the health librarian – current landscape
Today’s health librarians work in a range of health settings including hospitals and other clinical facilities, universities, research institutes, regulatory agencies, pharmaceutical and biotechnology companies, government departments, regional health services, professional colleges, cooperative research centres, not-for-profit and community organisations. A recently completed Census of Australian Health Libraries (Kammermann, 2016) stated that the total number of active libraries is 328. These libraries employ a mixture of 1250 professional, para-professional and non-qualified Library and Information Services staff.

In the hospital setting, health librarians provide evidence-based information to support clinicians in patient care, they assist with the development of clinical policies and procedures, conduct health technology assessments, and health library managers play an active role in areas such as strategic planning, quality and safety, accreditation, and general administration.

Hospital librarians purchase and maintain collections for hospital staff, which include print and online journals, books,
e-books, consumer health information, point-of-care tools, and scholarly and bibliographic databases. These resources need to be appropriately hosted in a way that makes it easy for hospital staff to find the information they require. For books and journal articles that are not available through a hospital library, hospital librarians cooperate nationally and internationally in highly efficient document delivery systems. Most hospital libraries provide study facilities with access to computers, print books and journals, photocopiers, scanners and printers.

Support for hospital research includes literature searching services, assistance with systematic reviews (where sometimes librarians are part of a systematic review team) and current awareness services in which articles from relevant journals are provided to keep users up to date with the latest research in their speciality. A more recent development is the assistance provided in data research management.

Training in health information skills and literacy is provided to hospital staff and in many cases to consumers (patients, carers and their families) and includes instruction on how to find the best health information and how to evaluate that information for relevancy, currency and authority. Library staff keep users updated on the intricacies of copyright law, making sure that their organisations comply with copyright regulations, and that print and online materials are used in a way that does not breach the publisher’s or author’s copyright restrictions, intellectual property rights or digital management restrictions.

Many of the services described above are also provided by health librarians in an academic setting. The client bases that health librarians serve are the students, academics and researchers in the various schools and faculties of health and medicine. Health librarians in this arena often have a defined liaison role between faculty and the library, connecting the teaching and research efforts of the university with library resources and services. Many attend faculty meetings and report on library business including new innovations and services and in turn gain valuable feedback from academic staff about their needs and the needs of their students. They also act as a valuable referral service, connecting staff and students with functional experts in the library in areas such as staff involved with copyright, data management and the institutional repository.

Curriculum support in terms of the purchase of appropriate online materials (such as e-books, journals and databases) and the provision of information and digital literacy to students of all levels, is a strong area of service in university libraries. Research support is an equally important role and includes advice and training in advanced literature searching, the development of publishing strategies (including open access publishing), citation searching and bibliometrics. Individual consultations with higher degree by research students and researchers are particularly valued and involve assistance with literature searching, bibliographic management and with the large growth area of systematic and other reviews. There is generally no scope for academic health librarians to conduct literature searches for users although this varies from university to university.

Other health information specialist roles within the academic sector include librarian researchers who support particular areas of health care research, for example the excellent work being done by Flinders University in palliative care (CareSearch, 2016). A researcher at The University of Melbourne is investigating education strategies for building the health informatics knowledge, skills and attributes required to improve the competence of the e-health workforce (The University of Melbourne, 2015). Some librarians are involved in the development of search filters, which are standardised search strategies designed to retrieve particular publication types or study designs when searching the literature. Examples include the PHC Search Filter (Primary Health Care Research & Information Service, 2016) for locating the primary health care literature; a wide range of health related topic filters from Flinders Filters (Flinders University, 2016) and Lit search from the Lowitja Institute (2015) designed to locate Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander health literature on the PubMed database.

Collaboration with health informaticians
In February this year HLA signed a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) with the Health Information Management Association Australia (HIMAA) (ALIA, 2016). The MOU “recognises that both organisations operate within the broad health information landscape to enhance health care management and outcomes in Australia” and is intended to promote cooperation, collaboration and effective communication between HIMAA, ALIA and HLA. As the MOU states, “both organisations are member based organisations that undertake activities in the areas of advocacy, education, professional development, information dissemination, communication, resource development and member support.” The Australasian College of Health Informatics (ACHI), HIMAA and HLA have worked together over two years to create a new set of definitions of health information roles. The aim is to contribute to health information workforce discussions at the national level and to future iterations of the

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Australian Bureau of Statistics’ Australian and New Zealand Standard Classification of Occupations. The definitions were published in June 2016 and can be found on the ACHI website (Australasian College of Health Informatics website, 2016).

In the workplace, hospital librarians work with their health informatics colleagues in several ways. These include performing searches of the literature on relevant topics such as new workflows, workforce planning in relation to electronic medical records and the digital hospital; working together on privacy training for clinical staff and hosting historical medical records material in the library’s digital repository. One hospital library manager has been working with the Head of the Health Information Services Department and with Clinical Nurse Educators to assist in the delivery of a course in Medical Terminology. Hospital libraries provide and maintain print and online resources that are essential to Health Information Managers such as MIMs Online and the HIMAA publication *The Australian Dictionary of Clinical Abbreviations Acronyms & Symbols.*

**Staying relevant and visible – research into the health library workforce**

As the MOU demonstrates, both organisations are working in the area of professional development for their members. HLA have been very active in this area and have conducted a major study into future workforce and professional development requirements for health librarians entitled *HLA Research Project 2009-11: Future Requirements for Health Librarianship Workforce and Education (ALIA & HLA, 2011).*

The aim of the two-year research project was “to determine the future requirements for health librarians in the workforce in Australia and develop a structured, modular education framework (post-graduate qualification and continuing professional development structure) to meet these requirements”. The project methodology included an environmental scan, a literature review, online surveys of health librarians and health library managers, and interviews with health employers.

Participants were asked about demographics, workforce composition, salaries and budgets, professional knowledge, responsibilities and about competencies that were required now and in the future. Questions were also asked about preferred methods of delivery for professional development and support for, and barriers to attendance and participation.

Results of the project included an indication of which areas of professional competency were rated most highly by health librarians (ALIA & HLA 2015). These were:

- Providing information services to meet user needs (80%)
- Managing health information resources in a broad range of formats (70%)
- Understanding and using technology and systems to manage information (67%).

Managers were 61% in favour of supporting specialist continuing professional development for their staff, with barriers being stated as time, distance and cost. When asked how librarians could contribute now and in the future to their “mission-critical goals”, employers expected health librarians to play a proactive and strategic role in their organisations and also acknowledged that without the librarian team the organisation would have “big problems”.

In her conference presentation, *Creating the health librarian professional workforce of the future,* Ritchie (2015) discussed this study in some detail. She outlined the realisation by HLA that “in order to be recognised as health professionals in the Australian health workforce, health librarians needed to work with national trends in health workforce planning and to do this a systematic approach to education and professional development was required.” The dilemma facing health librarians was that there existed no formal education pathway for health librarianship, no scope of practice, no nationally legislated registration system and there was no compulsory continuing professional development system in place.

Furthermore, Ritchie (2008) stated “Without nationally recognised qualifications, registration, certification and ongoing continuing professional development, health librarians risked being marginalised to the clerical or administration streams, invisibility in the health professional workforce, obsolescence.”

Great strides have been made by HLA since the project findings were gathered and published (ALIA & HLA, 2011; Hallam et al., 2010). These achievements are outlined further below and fall into the areas of demonstrating value and professional development.
Demonstrating value

The following studies and submissions have addressed the role of health librarians and their capacity to deliver services and resources that support safe and quality clinical practice:

- **Questions of life and death: an investigation into the value of health library and information services in Australia** (Health Libraries Inc & ALIA, 2012)
  
  This study, which was published in October 2012 by ALIA and Health Libraries Inc., surveyed 250 health information professionals and library users. The results suggested that although health libraries made a significant contribution to their users and are heavily used, many libraries have experienced a decrease in funding, staff and spaces. The reduction of services and the attendant implications on positive health outcomes for patients is discussed.

  
  ALIA, HLA and Health Libraries Inc. worked with SGS Economics & Planning Pty Ltd to examine the costs and benefits associated with the operation of health libraries across Australia. This research suggested that hospitals, government departments, associations and other organisations involved in healthcare, gain a $9 return for every dollar they invest in health libraries.

- A shorter publication which included these findings was **Worth every cent and more: an independent assessment of the return on investment of health libraries in Australia** (Health Libraries Inc, ALIA & HLA, 2013).

Other submissions include:

- Submission to the National Health and Hospitals Reform Commission, July 2008.
- Submission to the National e-Health Strategy, June 2008.
- Submission to the Health and Medical Research Strategic Review, April 1998.

The development of the national census of the health library workforce was an important project undertaken by HLA in 2012 and followed a previous survey conducted in 2002. Consultation with Health Workforce Australia regarding methodology helped refine the census data collection methods and the questions being asked, enabling researchers to gather more robust data. The results showed that the total number of active Australian library and information services was 328, a 2% reduction from the first survey. This reduction could indicate that health library services have by and large weathered the economic storms of the past two decades. The report stated that “data collected about the Australian health library and information services sector will be able to help inform planning, policy development, professional development and decision-making to further promote and develop the health library and information services sector … such data can assist the ALIA and the HLA executive to better target services to members and build a more informed sense of identify within and without the sector” (Kammermann, 2016).

Some examples of how the census data have already been used and will be used in the future include the following:

- for a Masters Research project into clinical librarianship
- for a submission to the Health Information Workforce subcommittee of the Australian Health Ministers Advisory Council to support health librarians being included as health information professionals rather than a related profession
- in a proposed research project by HLA which will investigate ways in which health librarians assist hospitals to comply with the Australian National Safety and Quality Health Service Standards
- to develop an online directory of Australian health library and information services.

Professional development

As previously stated, many professional development initiatives have come about as a direct result of the research and findings of the HLA Research Project 2009-11: Future Requirements for Health Librarianship Workforce and Education.

The first of these is the **Certified Professional (Health) Scheme** in which HLA has worked within the ALIA administrative framework, to create a formal, specialist competency-based, professional development and certification scheme for Australian health librarians and technicians. This is a three-year certification and revalidation cycle, with a requirement for reflection, documentation and audit. The scheme helps health librarians and health library technicians to identify courses and learning programs that will contribute to their professional development, and if desired, to gain recognition as a Certified Professional (Health). The competency mapping work has produced a list of approximately 100 health-related courses, events and programs classified according to the eight competency areas that are relevant to health librarians and technicians in Australia.

The online competency-based **Health Librarianship Essentials course** was run in 2015 and 2016. This course was developed by Queensland University of Technology and HLA in conjunction with a reference group of experienced health librarians. It can be articulated into a postgraduate qualification. The course explores the Australian health system and healthcare environment, and the diverse information resources made accessible by health librarians to health care practitioners, health academics, students and researchers. It covers medical terminology and evidence-based practice in health care. The 10-week course features guest lecture appearances and participant mentoring offered by HLA members.

**Professional development days** are held annually and are organised as national events as well as being scheduled in various cities. They are generally run on a particular theme such as the value proposition, systematic reviews and collaboration. In 2015 alone, HLA was involved in seven major professional development events in five cities. These events included full day workshops, online courses and residential workshops.

An **online journal club** was established two years ago. Journal articles are chosen by the group and a discussion is hosted on “PBWorks”, a hosted collaboration application. The club runs on a bimonthly schedule and has 74 members from Australia, United Kingdom, France and Sweden. Once
the discussion is finished a participant writes up an evidence summary, which is published in the following issue of HLA News.

HLA produces two publications, HLA News: National Bulletin of HLA and HLA Alerts.

HLA News, a quarterly online journal, is the main communication and marketing tool for the HLA group. The publication functions as a national news alerting service, an historical record of developments in health librarianship, a place to publish research, and a showcase for the achievements of health librarians and health libraries in Australia. It is indexed selectively by the Cumulative Index to Nursing and Allied Health Literature database (CINAHL), Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology Publishing (Informit), the Informed Librarian and the ILOSearch database. HLA Alerts is the monthly alerting service for HLA members. It was established in 2014 and is disseminated to members by email.

HLA administers two awards:
- The first is the biennial Anne Harrison Award (value $5,000), which encourages research projects that increase the understanding or explore the potential for the further development of health librarianship in Australia. The Census report and the Health Librarianship Essentials course referred to previously, are excellent examples of some of the work achieved through this award.
- The HLA/MedicalDirector Health Informatics Innovation Award has been in place since 2009 and is valued at $3,000 annually. It is awarded to projects that focus on innovation in health care information delivery with practical outcomes. The innovation can already have been achieved and the funds can be used to develop the innovation or for the professional development of the team. This award has supported work such as the development of a palliative care search filter and the development of an e-portfolio for professional development, elements of which were incorporated into the ALIA professional development and certification scheme.

Mapping scopes of practice with other health information professionals is also a future priority

Professional recognition – future directions

Future directions currently being considered by HLA are firstly to fill the gaps in course offerings, based on competencies. For example, the Health Librarianship Essentials course covered three competency areas which form the knowledge base for an aspiring librarian or a librarian who is new to the profession. These included:
- the healthcare system and environment
- health resources and collections
- expert searching and critical appraisal in an evidence based /scientific research framework.

Technology and informatics for health librarians, and research records/data management are large areas of need. The building blocks of a specialist postgraduate certificate and a three-year cycle of professional development activities are gradually being developed. Secondly, the data from the Census of Australian health library and information services could be used to further advocate for health librarianship. This could work together with an update of the 2013 SGS Economics report The Community Returns Generated by Australian Health Libraries (SGS Economics and Planning 2013). An updated study such as this, reinforced by the Census data would be a powerful promotional tool for health libraries at national and local levels.

Mapping scopes of practice with other health information professionals is also a future priority. Related health professions working in multidisciplinary teams in health care organisations, for example Health Informaticians, allied health workers and Health Information Managers, have experienced a blurring of boundaries and roles, and there is a need to work out “scopes of practice” so each professional group (including librarians) can contribute effectively to these teams. HLA appointed a National Manager in December 2015 to focus on recruitment and retention of members, communications, marketing and promotions, consumer health initiatives, and advocacy projects.

Finally, updating the publication Guidelines for Health Libraries (ALIA, 2008), which was first published in 1988 and last updated in 2008, is a priority for HLA. This is necessary to take into account revised national standards, new developments in health care and health librarianship, especially the advent of e-health and the integration of point of care databases with e-health records.

Conclusion

The research studies, advocacy reports and submissions conducted by HLA have demonstrated the valuable work being delivered by health information professionals across the sector and the impact of this work on clinical decision making, patient care, and health and medical education and research. As is more generally applicable in the current Australian health environment, economic restrictions may limit the expansion of health librarians’ ability to contribute in all these areas. This has been highlighted by the Census data showing an imbalance in the workforce (for every four newly recruited health librarians, there are ten due to retire in the next five years).

The HLA executive believes that education holds the key to the future of the health library workforce and this being the case, have developed a robust offering of continuing professional development offerings for members. This has the potential to not only maintain and improve standards of professional practice, but also to increase professional recognition among the other health professions, while ensuring relevance and employability. The Census data have provided a clearer picture of the health library workforce and this combined with future research, education and advocacy work will strengthen the foundations for a thriving and vibrant profession.
References


