

**IRISH HEALTH LIBRARIES:  
NEW DIRECTIONS**

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**REPORT ON THE STATUS OF  
HEALTH LIBRARIANSHIP &  
LIBRARIES IN IRELAND  
(SHELLI)**

**EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Health librarians in Ireland face significant challenges. The country's financial crisis means that the resources needed to support professional development, to maintain knowledge-based information resources and to overcome existing gaps in service provision will be hard won. This report argues that, despite these difficulties, health librarians in Ireland have the capacity to match international best practice and to continue to make a significant contribution to Irish health care. For this capacity to be realised, health librarians must see that the diverse and valuable role they currently play in the health system is fully recognised. Greater advocacy and systematic evaluation of health libraries will provide the evidence base that will consolidate the supportive view of the profession held by stakeholders and academia. It is essential to leverage this support so that health librarians can fully play their role in the development of an efficient, evidence-based and progressive health service in Ireland.

## Why was this report commissioned?

The Health Sciences Libraries Group (HSLG) of the Library Association of Ireland (LAI) commissioned this study for the following reasons:

- » to gain a broad understanding of what is happening in practice;
- » to gain knowledge about international best practice; and
- » to inform the strategic development and sustainability of health libraries and librarianship in Ireland.

The Department of Information Science and the Library and Information Statistics Unit (LISU) at Loughborough University undertook the study between December 2010 and March 2011. The research gathered both stakeholder and librarian views. Stakeholders include leaders of service users in academia and in clinical settings and policy makers in the Department of Health and the Health Service Executive (HSE).

## 110,000

health service staff in Ireland.

## Health services and health libraries

The health service is a very knowledge-intensive industry. There are 110,000 health service staff in Ireland who need to be able to access research information for their workplace skills and continuing professional development. The health service in Ireland is funded by the government and by the voluntary sector, and this dual source of funding is reflected in the types of libraries that make up the landscape of the Irish health library sector. The sector is further sub-divided by the academic, HSE and voluntary provision. The study identified 75 health libraries and information services of different types and this sets the lower boundary on the size of the sector. Forty-nine of these services were located at hospital sites, including academic teaching hospitals; 34 HSE libraries were identified. Staff associated with these library services numbered 23 subject librarians in academic libraries and 46 library staff (FTE) in the HSE sector. Twenty-two per cent of the individual members of the Library Association of Ireland are HSLG members; this translates into a significant, strong and active professional voice.

## 75

health libraries and information services of different types of which 49 of these services were located at hospital sites, including academic teaching hospitals.

## Stakeholder views

The consensus view of the stakeholders who participated in this study, especially the representatives of the major service users – doctors and nurses, was an appreciation of the value, role and contribution of libraries and librarians in health care services. The views and actions of the representative of the Department of Health interviewed are both encouraging and positive. These individuals are therefore identified as champions of the Irish health library service and of health librarians. However, there is also a perception among health librarians of a lack of understanding at senior management level and throughout the wider health service as to what the library service offers the health service. Librarians also identified a lack of visibility of libraries, and perceived a lack of understanding of the value of the library services, within the health service.

### **Health librarians' views**

Health librarians, particularly those outside the academic sector, feel that their services are vulnerable to cuts in staffing, which have already affected their ability to provide a comprehensive service to their users. The loss of resources also impacts on their continuing professional development, and on efforts to develop the skills of their junior staff. Irish health librarians receive generic rather than specific librarianship training and learn the health context for their role on the job. There is therefore potential for a significant skills gap in the future as senior staff retire.

The range of activities undertaken by health librarians in Ireland is broad, and there appears to be a blurring of distinctions between the roles of professional and para-professional staff in some areas.

### **Inequality of access to information**

The research also found considerable disparity in the level of information which is readily available to practitioners, for example between doctors and nurses, and between those in academic institutions and in hospitals. This is a growing concern as libraries are closed and amalgamated. User access to electronic resources is seen as a key issue by health librarians in all sectors. The issue is particularly marked where members of academic institutions work alongside colleagues employed directly by hospitals or the HSE, with different licensing arrangements. Physical access to the technology required to search for information online is also an issue in some clinical settings.

### **Future directions and international practice**

Future health library provision is seen to be dependent on information technology and the capacity to provide a range of services when and where they are needed. While advances in this area will rely on suppliers to provide appropriate mobile phone applications to enable access to resources, health librarians are ideally placed to support and promote such initiatives. Health librarians perceive their role to be changing, and expect a greater emphasis in future on user training and induction, literature searching and analysis, and involvement in clinical meetings and ward rounds. Little evidence was found of the use of clinical librarians in hospital settings in Ireland, and this is a role which could be expanded.

Ireland does not have the required body of evidence to show the impact of health libraries and health librarians on clinical practice and patient outcomes. Building this body of evidence is crucial to the future of the health library service. The worth of health libraries and librarians has been demonstrated in the abstract and international experience points to innovative ways of working which can help overcome the perceived lack of understanding of the value of the library services.

## **HSLG**

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is judged as the most appropriate body to drive forward the changes required to sustain services, effect change and develop Irish health librarians and library services.

The Irish health library community has a strong national professional voice in HSLG; committed and skilled health librarians working throughout the nation providing a range of services form a strong community of practice. Irish health libraries and librarianship are at a pivotal point in their history. While existing users value them, they are under threat. In order to develop their roles in support of the Irish health sector, investment in resources and staff is essential. Health libraries are seen to play a vital role in the delivery of clinical services internationally, and this is the desired standing for Irish health libraries. The gap between best international practice and Irish health librarian practice can be bridged. Given the diversity of the Irish health library sector and the current lack of a professional voice in government and the wider health service, HSLG is judged as the most appropriate body to drive forward the changes required to sustain services, effect change and develop Irish health librarians and library services.

## Recommendations

The evidence gathered in the study culminates in the following recommended actions, grouped in three strategic areas:

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### Identify champions and promote visibility

- » HSLG should positively develop their relationship with the Department of Health. The re-establishment of the library in this department is a golden opportunity to gain a voice at government level for libraries, and national recognition. This is key to broadening the understanding and influence of libraries in health services and the wider community.
- » All health librarians should identify a clinical and a corporate champion in their workplace and engage with them, building partnerships to raise the profile of the library services and promote their value more widely.
- » Health librarians should market their expertise in EBM, information literacy, and specialist information and search services to clinicians, hospital managers and other stakeholders within the academic and health service environments.
- » HSLG should develop a range of promotional materials and use these both within the health sector and more widely among stakeholders and the general public.
- » Health libraries should examine the relative positioning of their online presence within their organisations, and work to improve this if necessary.

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### Establish a body of evidence

- » Health library standards in Ireland should be reviewed. The Department of Health should adopt the standards, and HIQA should monitor library performance against them.
- » Performance indicators, tailored to the missions and major objectives of individual health library services, should be adopted in line with international standards.
- » HSLG should consult the academic library sector for best practice exemplars of data collection and monitoring.
- » All Irish health libraries should collect systematic evidence of the impact of their operations in improving patient outcomes and providing cost-effective health services.
- » Individual libraries should pro-actively use evidence to demonstrate the value and impact of library services to clinical managers and chief executives.
- » HSLG should co-ordinate and act for the sector in the collection and wide strategic dissemination of evidence.
- » HSLG should build an evidence base of successful projects to provide support for individual librarians.

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### Staff and service development

- » HSLG should support the development of clinical librarian services by building an evidence base of good practice in this specialist area.
- » Hospital librarians should consider how clinical librarian services might operate in their own circumstances.
- » Health librarians should identify clinical research opportunities in all sectors, and offer their information and knowledge skills to the research team.
- » HSLG should work towards defining a core collection for all health libraries.
- » HSLG should initiate a strategic discussion to prioritise practical and innovative ways to provide common levels of access to e-resources.
- » The hospital sector and the university sector should conduct a feasibility study on the provision of integrated information services within defined geographical areas.
- » Health librarians should aim to unify as a single nationwide purchasing consortium and enter into a new dialogue with all suppliers.
- » Health libraries should prioritise access to quality information via mobile phone applications and Web 2.0 technologies.
- » HSLG should work with LAI, CILIP and the higher education sector to encourage the inclusion of specialist health information content in university LIS courses.
- » HSLG should facilitate a mentoring scheme for new and solo health librarians.
- » HSLG should initiate a dialogue to promote practical and innovative ways to ensure equal access to e-resources for all users. Contributors to this dialogue should include representatives of medical schools, the nursing profession, the Department of Health and hospital management, as well as librarians and resource providers.

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The concepts of the credible, reliable and efficient service of both the library and librarian in the health arena in Ireland are well-established.

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The need for health care managers to support their decisions with evidence is a growing necessity in health care and essential in corporate governance. Librarians play an invaluable role in making relevant information available to practitioners when and where it is needed.

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The health service is a very knowledge-intensive industry. Information literacy is one of the many areas in which health librarians have unique and demonstrable skills.

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Hospital librarians effectively manage huge volumes of information, providing the right information at the right time to enhance medical staff effectiveness, optimize patient care and improve patient outcomes.

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Irish health libraries and information services should continue to review their effectiveness, measure their impact, and demonstrate value for money in line with health library standards.

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The gap between best international practice and Irish health librarian practice can be bridged. Health library services must be seen as a mainstream healthcare activity.

