EXPERT SPEAKS

My dream for medical students

Vasumathi Sriganesh

I am privileged to write this guest editorial for a journal by and for students interested in medical research. I know I have not been asked this because I hold "a position". I have been asked because students consider me as a friend. They love me for what I am; someone who, after spending twelve years working as a home-maker, went on to study Library and Information Sciences, then worked as a medical librarian, before arriving where I am now, working in a foundation that helps them in several ways.

Medical students of today have certain advantages that were not available to those even a generation ago. These advantages are obviously courtesy of the internet era. The fact that they can communicate across the world with no boundaries, learn from each other, and work on projects like bringing out an International Journal on Students' Research, makes for an exciting networking and learning experience – things that a generation ago could not have imagined doing so. Doctors of that generation had to do things differently. They read books and journals. They had to spend hours on print indexes of journals and the printed Index Medicus that came weekly. They were trained to make index cards and note down everything. If they needed articles from other libraries, they had mentally prepared themselves to wait for weeks or months, because the correspondence was by snail mail. There were no photocopiers, so students read things, absorbed them and noted down what was very important. Research obviously was something done by a privileged few who had access to good libraries and good research facilities.

But has the Internet made everything that much easier? Not in every aspect. We know that most articles are available online, but the majority of them are expensive to download. What do students do in such cases? Countries like USA, UK, Australia and New Zealand, to name a few have made strides in offering digital content to students and teachers alike. The institutional libraries subscribe for electronic access. Their library website indicates the availability of journals. They do additional things like creating a "Linkout" in PubMed (http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/projects/linkout/doc/liblinkout), by which they tell users which articles from their search results are available in their library collection. And yet, there are always additional articles that students would need. In most cases the library helps them by getting it from other libraries. They do this under a Copyright permission clause called the "Fair Use Clause". This clause in simple terms allows a library to give a copy of an article from their subscribed journals, for academic or research purposes. Sometimes the library is unable to help. One such situation is if the journal prohibits giving copies even for Fair Use! The other is – very often – when a journal is from a developing country and they are unable to locate it either online or from that country's libraries!

QMed Knowledge Foundation, Mumbai, Maharashtra, India. Email: vasu@qmedkf.org.in

Take a developing country (e.g. Indian) context. We may figure that some article we need may be available in some library abroad, but we are not sure how we can get it. Will the library charge? Will they give it free? Is it okay to ask? We face uncertainties when we try to get an article. We may be able to find an author's email address, but what if the author has changed institution? How about getting articles from our own country's libraries? There are resources called "Union catalogs", which unfortunately no one teaches us about! Union Catalogs are a "union" of list of journals available in a group of libraries. You can find out in how many libraries a specific journal is available, and for the range of years. In India one such catalog is the National Union Catalog for Scientific Serials in India or NUCSSI (http://nucssi.niscair.res.in). So if you want to get hold of an article from a journal that is not free online, you can check out NUCSSI. But there is a catch. You are never sure whether you will actually get the article from that library. This is because we have not formalized a "document delivery system" and only some libraries choose to respond to article requests.

In developing countries people do discuss "The Digital Divide" – what we do not have access to – compared to the availability in developed countries. But I do believe that while we do have a divide, the more important problem is that we do not make the best of what we do have access to. The lack of awareness and training is a more serious problem. Many developing countries have access to HINARI (Health InterNetwork Programme for Access to Health Research Initiative). India does not, but India has access to the Cochrane Database of Systematic Reviews. Government medical colleges have access to about 400 journals online through ERMED (Electronic Resources in Medicine), available at www.nmlermed.in. In addition they have access to approximately another 1300 journals from the National Medical Library, New Delhi. But neither has been promoted and taught to the extent of every individual in an institution knowing about them or how to use them efficiently. And in the "information process", marketing to the end user is a crucial component [1].

My dreams for medical students arise from the perspective of a librarian from a developing country as well as an educated health consumer.

As a librarian, I want every student to learn to

- Know the differences between various types of information resources (print or online) and to understand when to use what.
- Use libraries and exploit resources that have been procured for them.
- Respect available library resources and use them with care, so that they are available to all.

EXPERT SPEAKS

- Respect copyright laws so that libraries can negotiate for better rates for a large number of users.
- Search the literature resources in a structured manner, and not look only for "free online articles".
- Read carefully and write in one's own words rather than fall into the "easy trap of copy pasting".
- Reference correctly and by doing so –we would not only give credit to others, but also help people locate original resources easily for their interest.

As a librarian, I want faculty members to
- Use library resources very effectively, so that they stay well updated and teach students how to use them too. By doing so they should set an example.
- Make students refer to library and internet resources compulsorily so that they make it a habit and learn to reference correctly.
- Stay in touch with librarians and mutually work out ways in which the library and its resources can be completely utilized by all.
- Ensure that senior students start searching the literature correctly right from the beginning of their project, and continue the activity till they finalize their thesis/projects.

I want librarians in developing countries to
- Work towards building up services that match International standards. We can start with our available collections!
- Provide Indian resources to each other and to other countries too.
- Request their respective medical boards to provide country wide access to the most important journals.
- Use Internet tools like electronic catalogs and PubMed Linkout to help users with easy access.
- Work with their institutions to put up repositories of their faculty & students' publications and theses.
- Check the rules of library usage and update them for today's needs – especially for students. We need to encourage people to use and actually exploit all resources, both print and electronic. Usage does not mean just downloading or photocopying, but actual use that produces change and positive impact.
- Get a group of faculty and students who will volunteer to be "Friends of the library". These "Friends" should be people who will help the librarian and colleagues with inputs needed to offer the best and also come up with innovative ideas to tackle problematic issues.
- Get involved in more research based activities so that they can help students and faculty with Systematic reviews, statistics, critical appraisal, referencing and lots more.

I believe and hope that if my wish list comes true, medical students would get a great deal more in their education.

As an educated health consumer, my dream for students goes beyond academia. I would like students not only to become good doctors just by studying well and using library and internet resources effectively, but to become successful by having their patients think highly of them for their professional capabilities and their human qualities. I hope

that the current generation of students grows up to be doctors who will:

- Understand that they may be wrong at any point of time, and that they should accept it and learn from it.
- Learn good communication skills which I believe are integral not only to patient care, but also for interaction with colleagues and the overall learning process
- Think of doing some research even if they choose to go for private practice. And to know that research is not always done only in fancy laboratories.
- Be open to alternative therapies and know the difference between blind beliefs and established methodologies.
- Overall follow the noted doctor turned author – AJ Cronin's principle "Never to take anything for granted".

References

1. Shaughnessy AF, Slawson DC. Are we providing doctors with the training and tools for lifelong learning? *BMJ* 1999; 319:1280

Competing Interests
The author declares that she has no competing interests.

Funding