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Trends: Health Sciences and Biomedical Sciences Content

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Traditionally, many health sciences and biomedical libraries’ mission statements have emphasized that the libraries serve the research, education and clinical (patient care) information needs of their users. Addressing these needs is still at the core of service and collection management, but each of these areas has developed, expanded, and brought new challenges over the past few years in ways that a crystal-ball-gazer could not have anticipated. Biomedical research advances have continued at a fast pace, while health profession education and patient care have not stood in place, either. A new alphabet soup of terms and phrases is in current vogue: global health, patient safety, evidence-based health care, the Human Genome Project, embedded health sciences librarians, informationists, bioinformatics, medical informatics. This special issue of Against the Grain (ATG) contains a collection of papers that addresses recent trends in biomedical and health information production, collection, and provision. The papers may reveal threads common to developments affecting various types of libraries, or the publishing and scholarly communication sectors, but perhaps with a slightly unique or different “spin” that is specific to biomedical and health fields.

Libraries serve the information needs of health sciences and biomedical sciences populations in various settings — hospitals and academic medical centers, educational institutions, health associations, government health agencies, pharmaceutical and other health-related industries, etc. Public libraries and general academic libraries, too, are often called upon to provide information resources for health and medical information quests. The Medical Library Association (www.mlanet.org) took up the gauntlet when it developed a Consumer Health Information Specialization Program. While Category A of the program addresses administrative and service planning issues, one of the aims of Category B is to help with resource identification training. In her paper, Patricia Pinkowski reviews some recent trends and challenges in meeting the information needs of the increasingly demanding user group seeking health information — the general population, patients, collectively called “consumers.”

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While it may not be true for many consumer-oriented book and audiovisual-based collections, for many years the rule of thumb in many health sciences collections’ budgeting was that approximately 80% of a collection budget’s allotment was set aside for serials. [p. 106] Journals have been and continue to be a traditionally dominant communication vehicle in the constantly changing biomedical and health sciences fields. It is important to note that other traditional publication types are still becoming “journal-like” in 2008, four years after the 24th Charleston Conference, with its chosen theme, “All the World’s a Serial.” The evolving nature of scholarly publishing and dissemination in all fields and across all publication types warrants vigilance and current awareness. For this ATG issue, two papers, one by Meg White, one by Elizabeth Lorbeer and Nicole Mitchell, examine a publication format earlier covered in 2001 and 2005 issues of ATG, but still very much in flux. White surveys the current “topography” of eBooks for the health sciences, Lorbeer and Mitchell present insights into their use by academic health sciences users and the resulting collection management issues for libraries.

Recently, “translational medicine” has become an increasingly prevalent phrase. Since it involves research that goes “from bench to bedside,” many institutions are building their biomedical basic research enterprises to span the bridge to clinical research and patient care endeavors that are already in place. The introduction to an April 2008 Journal of Medical Internet Research article, “Supporting emerging disciplines with eCommunities,” addresses the changing nature of science as evolving, “from a solitary pursuit into a team-based collaborative activity and, more recently, into a multidisciplinary research enterprise.” Increasingly, commercial information products, portals, and “toolkits” are announced that aim to funnel or pull together information resources produced by or needed by clinicians or researchers. Jaron Porciello, Medha Devare, and Jon Corson-Rikert write about the challenges of meeting collaborating researchers’ information needs and share the experience of their academic institution’s library as it addressed these needs, utilizing a “build it and they will come” approach. The research discovery tool about which they write was initially designed for life sciences researchers, and the authors report on its evolution and new developments that expand the project’s utility to biomedical and other researchers.

Last but not least, interest continues in the history of biomedical and health institutions, scientific advances and medical accomplishments (especially those of affiliated alumni and faculty). There is still value seen in locally produced, or locally available, or unique, or rare resources. The U.S. National Library of Medicine houses one of the world’s largest history of medicine collections and its History of Medicine Website, www.nlm.nih.gov/hmd/index.html, includes links to several regularly updated directories of history of medicine collections. Melissa Nasea and Ruth Moskop share their experience, insights and advice on some recent trends and challenges for biomedical and health libraries and librarians “on the frontlines,” in serving one of the most revered traditional roles of the library profession — preservation of the past.

Column Editor’s Note: Thank you to all of the special issue authors who agreed to share their thoughts, insights, and experience. Thank you to Katina Strauch for her guidance. This special issue is a snapshot in time. Themes of Charleston Conferences of the past, “Plus Ca Change” (1987) or “And the Beat Goes On” (1999) resonate. Someone will quite likely need to revisit trends in health and biomedical sciences content again soon! — RK

Endnotes