

# Value of written health information in the general practice setting

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**SUMMARY.** *The value of a library for patients as a way of providing written health information in the general practice setting has been investigated using a questionnaire. In 15 months, 243 books were borrowed from one library. Each book contained a questionnaire and 163 questionnaires were returned (67%). It was found that 106 respondents (65%) would not have sought the information elsewhere and 159 respondents (98%) found the books they had read to be very useful or of some use. The perceived level of anxiety after reading was raised in nine respondents (6%) but reduced in 71 (44%). Patients read books on 53 separate topics overall, although 73 respondents (45%) read on 10 recurring topics. A patients' library thus enables most patients to gain useful information from their general practice without increasing their anxiety.*

## Introduction

As the National Health Service becomes increasingly consumer oriented, patients are demanding greater participation in their own care. In particular, many patients are dissatisfied with the information they receive from their doctor.<sup>1</sup> In the face of these growing expectations, many general practitioners are seeking ways to improve the delivery of their services. One approach is to provide patients with suitable books about their condition.<sup>2-4</sup>

A patients' library in a surgery or health centre can include books, journal articles, videotapes and audio cassettes which are available for loan to patients. Its purpose is to provide health information, at an appropriate level and at the time of consultation, on a range of medical conditions and health topics. Patients can be encouraged to select material themselves, or be directed to specific material by their doctor or another member of the health care team. Patients should always be given the opportunity to discuss any concerns resulting from the information provided.

The aims of this study were to determine the value of providing health information via a patients' library in one general medical practice and to discover the perceived effects such information had on patients' anxiety levels.

The patients' library under discussion was set up as the result of the collaborative efforts of the Health Information Service,

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based at Lister Hospital, Stevenage and one local general practitioner. Funding of £1600 was provided by Hertfordshire Library Service to purchase approximately 200 books, covering a total of 107 topics, selection being based on the topics most frequently requested from the health information service. The books were selected jointly by the general practitioner and a librarian from the Health Information Service, the latter providing guidelines on what to look for when selecting stock. The librarian also advised on the stock's subject classification, shelf arrangement and cataloguing. A manual was produced for the receptionist staff who manage the library, covering the procedures for issuing books, dealing with returned books, renewing and requesting books, as well as dealing with overdue books and recording simple data.

## Method

The practice involved in the study has 11 046 patients (5532 female, 5514 male) and is served by six general practitioners. The patients' library was set up in February 1989 and over the first 15 months a questionnaire was provided with each book when issued. The library was available to all patients, although initially only on the recommendation of a health professional. In March 1990 the library was moved into the waiting room giving patients direct access to the books.

To assess the usual reading habits of respondents the questionnaire asked patients about their use of the public library service and whether or not they generally read books or articles on health matters. Patients were also asked how useful they had found the book from the library and whether it had been recommended by a health professional or they had chosen it themselves. In the absence of any knowledge of the patients' anxiety levels prior to their use of the library, the questionnaire attempted to identify their perceived anxiety level after they had taken out a book from the library. Patients were also asked whether they would have sought health information elsewhere, were it not so readily available in the library; this was related to the perceived value of the literature. In order to determine which topics were chosen respondents were asked to record book titles and to comment on the contents.

The data were analysed using contingency table analysis.

## Results

During the 15-month study period 243 books were issued and a total of 163 questionnaires (67%) returned. Only 19 of the 163 respondents were men (12%) — a male to female ratio of 1:8. The mean number of books issued per month was 16.

There was a significant relationship between public library use and whether or not patients read material on health matters (chi square with Yates' correction = 15.4,  $P < 0.001$ ) (Table 1). Only 57 respondents (35%) would have sought the information elsewhere had they not had access to the library. Of the 106 respondents who would not have sought the information elsewhere, 73% were users of a public library (Table 2). The information gained from reading was found to be very useful by 77 of the 163 respondents (47%) and of some use by a further 82 (50%). Only four respondents (2%) considered their reading of no use. These patients commented on the book's failure to deal with the specific aspects of the problem concerning them. Among the patients who would not have sought information

**Table 1.** Reading habits of the 163 respondents.

	No. (%) of respondents	
	Public library users (n = 126)	Not public library users (n = 37)
<i>Read material on health matters</i>		
Yes	79 (63)	9 (24)
No	47 (37)	28 (76)

n = total number of respondents in group.

**Table 2.** Whether respondents would have sought information elsewhere by use of a public library and the level of usefulness of the book.

	No. (%) of respondents	
	Would have sought information elsewhere (n = 57)	Would not have sought information elsewhere (n = 106)
<i>Users of public library</i>		
Yes	49 (86)	77 (73)
No	8 (14)	29 (27)
<i>Level of usefulness of book</i>		
Very useful	31 (54)	46 (43)
Of some use	24 (42)	58 (55)
Of no use	2 (4)	2 (2)

n = total number of respondents in group.

elsewhere 98% found their book very useful or of some use (Table 2).

The perceived level of anxiety after reading material from the library was raised in nine of the 163 respondents (6%) and reduced in 71 (44%). The remaining 83 respondents (51%) perceived no change in their anxiety levels as a result of their reading. There was no significant difference in anxiety levels between patients who had had their book recommended or who had chosen it themselves (Table 3).

Overall, information was sought on 53 separate topics during the 15 month period. The 10 most frequently recurring topics were: the menopause (11 respondents); cystitis and stress (eight each); Alzheimer's disease; bereavement, death and dying; child care; phobias and women's health (seven each); candidiasis (six) and diabetes (five). Thus, 73 respondents (45%) read on these 10 topics.

## Discussion

This study has shown that considerably more women than men used the patients' library. Reasons for this difference might include a tendency for health professionals to regard women as carers, therefore, recommending texts to them more often; the tendency for women to display a greater interest in health matters than men; or the possibility that the consultation rate was higher among women than men. However, it was not possible to compare practice consultation rates by sex from the data available in this study.

While use of a public library does not in itself imply an interest in reading material on health matters, it is noteworthy that 77% of the respondents (126/163) stated that they did use a public library and of these 63% stated that they generally read material on health matters. In contrast, only 24% of those who were not library users read material on health matters.

An index of the value of the patients' library is public library use related to the proportion of respondents who stated that they

**Table 3.** Perceived level of anxiety of readers who selected a book themselves or had a title recommended.

Perceived level of anxiety	No. (%) of respondents	
	Recommended reading (n = 117)	Self-selected (n = 46)
More anxious	6 (5)	3 (7)
Less anxious	49 (42)	22 (48)
No change in anxiety	62 (53)	21 (46)

n = total number of respondents in group.

would not have sought the specific information had it not been so readily available in the patients' library. Of the respondents who would not have sought the information elsewhere, 73% were public library users, suggesting that patients do not generally consider the public library to be a useful source of health information. Of the respondents who would not have sought the information elsewhere 98% found the books they had read to be very useful or of some use. The few respondents who found their books to be of no use commented on the books' failure to deal with the specific aspects concerning them.

One of the major objections to the provision of a library for patients concerns the possible anxiety that general or specific health information may generate. This anxiety could lead to hypochondriacal reactions and in turn generate an increased workload for general practitioners. The findings of this study suggest that health information disseminated in this way does not generate increased anxiety, endorsing the results of the study by Varnavides and colleagues.<sup>5</sup>

The total number of books issued during the study did not represent an unduly large workload. However, no information is available on the number of patients simply browsing in the library or on whether patients' increased knowledge influenced subsequent consultation rates and lengths of consultation with the doctor.

As a result of this study we would argue for an increase in the availability of patients' libraries and to this effect, the Health Information Service has secured funding to set up a further six libraries in general medical practices in Hertfordshire. Future research should concentrate on examining the criteria which health professionals use for recommending texts to patients and in exploring why women readers predominate. As public library users appear to read generally on health matters, yet many would not have sought the information elsewhere were it not so readily available in the patients' library, further investigation is also needed to identify the exact sources used by patients to gain specific health information.

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