

INVESTIGATING THE VALUE AND ANALYSING THE ECONOMICS OF HEALTH LIBRARIES

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During the first half of 2012, Health Libraries Inc. became acutely aware that closures, mergers, staff redundancies and a reduction of Victorian health library operating hours had become a reality in the current economic climate.

Some Health Libraries Inc. Committee members had attended an advocacy workshop run by Sue McKerracher a couple of years earlier and it was decided that her marketing and advocacy knowledge would be worth sharing with the wider Victorian health library community. As discussions commenced with Sue and her business, The Library Agency, the situation became increasingly critical with more health libraries being affected by budget cuts.

Among those affected was Jane Edwards, President of the Health Libraries Inc. Committee and Library Manager at the Royal District Nursing Service, when both RDNS library positions were made redundant. Following some negotiations, Jane's colleague left the organisation and Jane accepted a 'new' library redeployment role for 25 hours per week. This was a 54% reduction to previous hours of service. Unfortunately, their situation was not unique.

What started as a proposed two hour workshop developed into a foundation for the 2012 Health Libraries Inc. conference, 'Staying Alive –

Empowering and Valuing Health Libraries and Information Services'. The program aimed to build on the advocacy workshop by providing relevant and timely information to help all health library and information professionals (from library assistants to library managers) to better place themselves in a position to promote and protect their valuable library service and hence their jobs.

Sue worked with the Health Libraries Inc. Committee to develop a survey based on a large-scale study done in 2011 on the value of Victorian public libraries, *Dollars, Sense and Public Libraries*: <http://www.slv.vic.gov.au/public-libraries>.

More than 250 Health Libraries Inc. members and their library users contributed to the survey, which provided supportive and relevant data for a report on the value of health libraries. The results from the survey were delivered at the annual Health Libraries Inc. conference in 2012 and Sue led a stimulating and inspiring discussion on how to use the findings to better position libraries within health organisations.


Questions of life and death: An investigation into the value of health library and information services in Australia, was launched soon after the conference. It is available via the Health Libraries Inc. website: www.hlinc.org.au/.

The following findings demonstrated our value to users:

- 95% said it had helped them progress their studies
- 95% said it helped them discover new and valuable information
- 86% said it helped keep them abreast of the latest clinical developments
- 83% said it had helped them improve health outcomes for their patients
- 82% said it helped them progress their research
- 76% said it had changed their thinking and improved their diagnosis or treatment plan
- 76% said it had helped them achieve higher marks in their exams
- 65% said it had helped them confirm their diagnosis or treatment plan.

The survey results showed that print and e-resource budgets, staffing levels and floor areas have declined despite a significant increase in users, and there is little prospect of improvement in 2013. Key issues included:

- Reduction in staff hours having a detrimental effect on the delivery of services
- Lack of budget for essential print and e-resources
- Visibility of the service in the digital environment
- Continuing need for print collections
- Uncertainty about the future
- Lack of understanding about the value of the service at organisational management level.



Questions of life and death

An investigation into the value of health library and information services in Australia

"An invaluable resource if I am to provide the latest and best evidence based care to my clients."

**An initiative of Health Libraries Inc, supported by the Australian Library and Information Association (ALIA)
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The report generated a lot of interest from colleagues and health professionals nationally and internationally, including health library staff similarly affected in the US, and in the *e-healthcare brief* – newsletter of the Australian Healthcare & Hospitals Association (AHHA).

Those who attended the conference were also clearly invigorated by the findings, discussion and the report, with a number of Victorian health library professionals investigating undertaking further studies into the value of our profession and services.

However, it was also clear that a majority of staff and resource cuts in health libraries were based on financial justifications and an economic analysis would be even more effective. During the preparations for the survey and report, Sue McKerracher took on the position of Executive Director of the Australian Library and Information Association (ALIA) and was keen to continue her work with advocating for health libraries.

So in 2013, Health Libraries Inc. in conjunction with ALIA, Health Libraries Australia (an ALIA group), the Australian Government Libraries Information Network (AGLIN) and the Australian Law Librarians' Association collaborated on an initiative using the services of SGS Economics and Planning to assess the return on investment of health, government, law and corporate libraries. SGS provided economic advice and analysis for the public library study and have a trusted reputation amongst many large public decision-makers, including health library stakeholders such as hospital administrators.

The survey was sent to library managers to complete and results are currently being analysed. Soon, selected individual health libraries will be approached to provide case study data to support the survey results.

It is anticipated that by developing an overall framework, each library group (health, government, law, specials) will then produce a report demonstrating the dollar value and return on investment for their services to their users.

The project is especially important in the current tight financial environment, with special libraries facing strong competition for funding. We hope to build a strong business case that supports the vital work that health libraries perform. The report will be launched at the upcoming Health Libraries Inc. Conference being held at the State Library of Victoria on October 18th 2013.