Assessing consumer health information needs in a community hospital*

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A study was conducted by the Oakwood Hospital Library in Dearborn, Michigan, to document health information needs and opinions among staff physicians and area health consumers. The study sought to discover which community sources, besides the hospital library, were consulted for health information and how helpful these sources were; what types of health information physicians were providing to patients in their offices; and whether and how physicians and health consumers might differ in their perceptions of health information. Study results, along with suggested opportunities for additional investigation, are presented.

INTRODUCTION

In its role as a neutral, inexpensive, and reliable provider of health information, the hospital library increasingly is consulted by consumers for answers to health questions. In developing programs to respond to this trend, hospital libraries often must convince indifferent or skeptical hospital administrators and staff physicians of the need for consumer health information services. The building of staff physician support for such services can be hindered by the traditional view of physicians as the best and only source of health information for the public. This view is sustained, in part, by insufficient recognition of the role played by physicians in the delivery of consumer health information. Rees alludes to this issue in his discussion of physician-patient communication issues [1]. Other authors have reported on studies of clinical information needs of physicians [2-3]. Little information is available, however, concerning the attitudes and practices of physicians regarding the delivery of consumer health information. Little is known about the types of information physicians give to patients who request supplementary information, or, when physicians encourage patients to seek independent sources of health information, where or to whom they are referred. Do physicians send their patients to community sources, such as the public health department or the public library? From the viewpoint of consumers, how effective are these types of sources in answering health information questions?

For those designing and justifying consumer health information services, answers to such questions can provide insight into the types of services used and needed by consumers and can produce persuasive documentation to build support for establishment of these services. This paper reports on a study by the Oakwood Hospital Library in Dearborn, Michigan, to document health information needs and opinions among staff physicians and area health consumers.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Articles describing consumer health information projects, evaluating materials for purchase, and outlining the general need for services are abundant, dating back to the early 1970s. Rees provides the most recent and comprehensive list of program descriptions for thirteen leading consumer health informa-

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tion services worldwide [4]. Additional examples of established consumer health information services are described by Kernaghan [5]. Discussions of the key planning issues that must be addressed in establishing such services are provided by Eisenstein and Faust [6] and Lindner [7]. The importance of the needs assessment process in planning for consumer health information services is discussed by Bandy [8] and Kenyon [9].

Much less common are articles reporting the results of needs assessment studies undertaken in the development of consumer health information services. Moeller and Deeney describe a 1982 study of 2,000 citizens surveyed to determine frequency of consumer health information needs, information sources consulted, and the scope and type of services desired [10]. The Eakin study surveyed consumer users of health information at the Houston Academy of Medicine–Texas Medical Center Library and the Houston public library [11]. Richetelle [12] and Marshall [13] report on an investigation into the types of health questions asked at public libraries. Ben-Shir discusses a survey of 769 consumers at MacNeal Hospital in suburban Chicago, where, as part of a larger hospital satisfaction survey, consumers were asked how well their information needs were being met by the hospital staff [14].

Although the practice of surveying the potential consumer to determine the need for health information services seems fairly well documented, the practice of surveying the medical staff as a separate group—but as a part of the larger consumer health information needs assessment picture—is not documented in the literature. Also undocumented are studies on physician reaction to and perception of consumer health information services sponsored by libraries. By studying information needs from both the consumer and the health professional perspectives, the authors hoped to draw a complete picture of the total need for health information services, determining what types of services are in most demand, where the services should be located, and differences in attitudes between consumers and health professionals concerning these issues. This approach also promised an opportunity to compare the viewpoints of physicians and consumers on selected issues, such as the importance of access to health information, and the best location of a consumer health library service. Finally, it was hoped that the inclusion of a physician group in the study would help to convince skeptical staff physicians of the value of consumer health information services.

BACKGROUND

Since the 1970s, the Oakwood Hospital Library has maintained a small collection of consumer health books and pamphlets. In recent years, there has been a dramatic increase in community requests for these types of materials. By the fall of 1991, the library was receiving a monthly average of sixty unsolicited walk-in visits and forty phone calls made for this purpose. At the same time, the library was receiving an increasing number of requests from physicians and nurses for information to hand out to patients.

These observations were brought to the attention of the Oakwood Hospital Library Committee, which appointed a Consumer Health Library Task Force representing physicians, nurses, and health educators. The task force requested that the library undertake a needs assessment study, the purpose of which would be to document the level of need for consumer health information among physicians and members of the local community, to identify the sources consumers were using to obtain health information, to determine how successful consumers were in obtaining needed health information through existing sources, and to determine whether and to what extent a consumer health information library would be used.

The study was conducted during November 1991. Results were reported to the Consumer Health Task Force in January 1992, and a decision was made to use the survey data to request a $29,500.00 grant from the Oakwood Hospital Foundation to establish a consumer health information library. The grant request was approved in May 1992, and the consumer health library opened in March 1993 as part of the Oakwood Hospital Library.

METHODOLOGY

Descriptive survey methodology was used to elicit opinions from a physician group and a consumer study group. The need for timeliness of response was an important factor in determining the study methodology, because the timetable for gathering of data and submission of a grant proposal was only three months. The physician group chosen was the 600-member Oakwood Hospital medical staff, because the authors felt this group would provide a relatively quick response. Also, because this was the library's primary user and support group, the authors were interested in knowing the extent to which these physicians would support a consumer health library service. While strict statistical sampling methods were not used, this group is fairly characteristic of a typical community hospital medical staff. Although Oakwood Hospital has a large teaching component, the hospital began as a small general hospital, retains strong community roots, and has a medical staff representing a typical range of specialties.

The consumer study group consisted of 1,000 individuals whose names were obtained from attendance lists at Oakwood-sponsored community edu-
carnation programs. As previous users of these services, these individuals would be primary targets for marketing of the proposed consumer health library service, so the authors were interested in their specific views. It was acknowledged that there might be bias in the responses of this group because the mailing lists contained names of individuals who already had sought health information through various hospital outreach programs. This concern was outweighed by the belief that these were active health consumers who might provide more informed viewpoints on health information than the community at large.

A one-page questionnaire was developed for each group. Some questions were constructed to allow for comparison of physician and consumer viewpoints; in these cases, identical questions were included on both questionnaires. In other cases, questions were designed to focus on the physician's or the consumer's specific role in the information process.

Consumer survey forms were sent through the mail with stamped, self-addressed reply envelopes attached. The physician surveys were sent to physician offices as part of a monthly mailing from the hospital's medical staff office. The forms were sent to physician offices, rather than through the in-house hospital mail system in the hope that the forms would stand a better chance of being read and answered in the physician's office, rather than during his or her patient rounds through the hospital.

Respondents were asked to return the forms within one month. Because of the limited time available for proposing the consumer health project, follow-up surveys were not attempted. The response rates of 30.5% for consumers and 19.5% for physicians were determined to be satisfactory given the time restrictions of the study. (If the study were to be duplicated, a larger sample would be advisable.)

PHYSICIAN RESPONSES

Of 600 physician surveys sent, 117 (19.5%) were returned. More than half of the respondents represented the primary care areas: internists (23% of total responses), family practitioners (16.2%) and obstetricians/gynecologists (14.5%). Respondents were asked to categorize the various forms of health information they most frequently give to their patients. As shown in Figure 1, pamphlets were identified as the most common form of health information given to patients, other than verbal consultations. When asked by their patients for additional information, physicians most frequently referred them to other health professionals (Figure 2). Patients also were referred to the public health department or other public agency and to public, university, or hospital libraries fairly often.

When asked if they considered access to appropriate health information to be a problem, only 44% of physician respondents said yes. Yet, at the same time, 91% of physicians said they would refer patients to a
hospital-operated consumer health library, 88.7% said they would request materials from the consumer health library to give to their patients, and 90% said they would view such a service as a benefit for Oakwood physicians.

Kernaghan notes the importance of location to the success of a hospital-based consumer health information service, while also stressing that the chosen location must suit the needs and considerations of the individual institution [15]. In this study, physicians expressed a preference for a location on the main hospital campus. Their second choice was a location at one of the hospital’s smaller satellite facilities (Figure 3).

COMMUNITY RESPONSES

Of the 1,000 community surveys sent, 305 (30.5%) were returned. When asked where they sought information about health problems, respondents overwhelmingly indicated their personal physician or other health professional. The second most frequent source chosen by consumer respondents was the public library, followed by the public health department and university or hospital library. Because respondents were asked to check all sources used, it is not possible to determine exact preferences.

Respondents then were asked how often they could find appropriate information. Figure 4 shows how consumers responded: 26% said they were successful in obtaining answers to health questions most of the time, 36% said they were successful half of the time, and 38% felt they were successful less than half the time.

A clear majority—69%—of consumer respondents considered getting appropriate health information to be a problem, and 92% indicated they would use a consumer health library if Oakwood operated one. Although more than one third of consumer respondents (36%) said they would like to see a consumer health library located at their area public library, a large number (46%) said they would use a facility located on the hospital main campus or an off-site location.

DISCUSSION

The study revealed a mixture of opinions among physicians on the issue of health information access yet strong support for the concept of a consumer health library service. While fewer than half of physician respondents saw consumer health information as a problem, most said they would refer patients to a consumer health library and would view such a service as a benefit for physicians. The study did not specifically ask physicians how they saw their role as
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Figure 3
Where would you like to see such a service located?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Location</th>
<th>Physicians</th>
<th>Consumers</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Oakwood Hospital</td>
<td>68</td>
<td>118</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dearborn Public Library</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>166</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Oakwood Off-Site or Satellite Location</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>48</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>33</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Communicators of health information, and this would be a worthwhile topic for further investigation. Also, it would be interesting to determine whether the physician opinions expressed in this study reflected a change in attitude over the past decade.

Consumer responses were consistent with those of physicians in terms of their positive view of a consumer health library service, but the two groups differed on the issue of access to health information. More than two thirds of consumer respondents viewed this as a problem, compared with fewer than half of the physicians. In addition, although consumer respondents overwhelmingly identified physicians as their primary source of health information, only 26% of consumers felt they were successful in obtaining answers to health questions. This result appears to support the contentions of Rees and others who assert that communication between physician and patient has deteriorated in recent decades, leading patients to seek health information from independent sources such as consumer health information libraries [16-18]. Additional research investigating the information transfer aspect of the physician-patient communication process would provide insight into means of improving health information delivery to patients.

While consumer respondents were supportive of the idea of a hospital-based consumer health library, the survey results also suggest a role for other community agencies, particularly the public library, in delivery of health information to consumers. Consumer respondents identified the public library as an important source of health information, with more than a third identifying the public library as a desirable location for a consumer health information ser-
Several models of multitype community health library programs have been cited in this article, as have studies investigating types of health information questions presented in public libraries. Additional studies documenting health consumers' satisfaction not only with public libraries but also with dedicated consumer health libraries' services would be helpful in better understanding and responding to health information needs.

SUMMARY

The Oakwood study illustrates the usefulness of consumer health research data in substantiating the value and need for consumer health information services. At Oakwood, the survey results solidified physician and administrative support for consumer health information as a worthy hospital project, and the data were cited as key elements by the Oakwood Hospital Foundation in approving a grant to establish a consumer health library service. A follow-up study is planned to measure consumer satisfaction with the services of the Oakwood consumer health information service.

While the study succeeded in documenting a significant level of interest in consumer health information services among physicians and consumers, the results provide but a glimpse into the attitudes and practices of physicians regarding delivery of consumer health information. Additional studies aimed at enriching the consumer health information knowledge base, especially in-depth research on specific aspects of consumer needs, would enhance the efforts of libraries seeking to secure funding for consumer information services and promote an active role for libraries in the consumer health information movement.

REFERENCES

15. KERNAGHAN, op. cit.
16. REES, op. cit.

Received September 1993; accepted January 1994