

# Information literacy and health literacy

## A challenge for librarians?

In Norway there is little mention of health information in the public libraries' strategy plans and there is little mention of public libraries in the strategy plans of the health authorities.

Greater inter-ministerial library cooperation to boost information literacy in health and medicine and also to enhance the general public's understanding of health in cooperation with municipal healthcare professionals will probably make libraries an even more attractive priority area for the authorities.

### Libraries and community health services

Healthcare professionals employed by local and county authorities require library services that can assist them in updating their professional skills, and the ordinary member of the public needs help

to find relevant, high-quality health information. Public libraries seem to be the obvious choice to play the role of the library of the municipal primary health services.

There are several reasons why public libraries are suited to such a role. They have always promoted the education of the general public and given their users free access to the prime sources of knowledge. They can be found in all municipalities, the general public place great trust in them and librarians have a high level of information literacy.

The new *Public Libraries Act* places

emphasis on the library's role as a meeting place and arena for public discussions and debates, thus endorsing the idea of developing the libraries as a meeting place in a health-related context.

### Promotes public health project

The website Helsebiblioteket.no is a publicly funded medical knowledge service that gives healthcare professionals free access to online, high-quality health information. Many of the resources offered are available to everyone in Norway, giving patients and their family access to the world's leading medical reference works.

The website offers a good alternative to the low-quality information that proliferates on the Internet, and it is vital that the public libraries are aware of the range of opportunities it offers. In order to convey this most effectively, we consider it essential to bring the libraries on board.

The goal of The public library promotes public health project has been to bolster the libraries' role as a provider of and an arena for quality-assured health information to both healthcare professionals in the municipal health service and the population at large.

The process started when Helsebiblioteket.no contacted the county libraries in Nordland, Nord-Trøndelag and Sør-Trøndelag to explore interest in holding



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Health information at the Nordland fylkesbibliotek. Photo: Nordland fylkesbibliotek



Daytime seminar at Nordland fylkesbibliotek Photo: Nordland fylkesbibliotek

## DEFINITIONS OF LITERACY

"Information literacy = the ability to recognize when information is needed and to locate, evaluate, and use the needed information effectively."

"Health literacy = degree to which individuals have the capacity to obtain, process, and understand basic health information and services needed to make appropriate health decisions."

Definitions are from MeSH (Medical Subject Headings), the National Library of Medicine's controlled vocabulary thesaurus.

local seminars on key online health resources and in including lectures by experts on mental health in order to create interest and encourage healthcare professionals to participate together with librarians.

The idea was well received, and an application for project funding was submitted to the National Library of Norway, which supported the project. Nordland county library took on the role of project owner and Helsebiblioteket.no had the role of project manager.

It was vital to make the task straightforward and feasible. As project manager, Helsebiblioteket.no took responsibility for the subject content, and the county libraries were in charge of the events and marketing. The events consisted of:

- Lectures on the key online health resources for librarians and healthcare professionals
- Lectures by experts on mental health aimed at healthcare professionals and librarians
- Open evening lectures by expert on mental health, for the general public.

### Implementation

Six events were held: in Trondheim, Stjørdal, Bodø, Namsos, Mo i Rana and Trondheim. The events were marketed through the county authorities' websites, email, telephone, social media and posters. Healthcare professionals played an active role.

Twelve two-hour lectures were held. Six lectures – *Health information you can access freely online* – dealt with websites providing health-related knowledge:

Kunnskapsenteret.no, Helsebiblioteket.no, Helsenorge.no and MedlinePlus.gov. In addition, the termbase *MeSH (Medical Subject Headings) in Norwegian and English* was presented. This is a useful tool for conceptual understanding, and for achieving relevant search hits in central databases.

Three lectures were entitled *Serious personality disorders*. Antisocial, borderline and schizoid personality disorders were presented, with emphasis on the combination of these. Ways of approaching people with these personality disorders were discussed.

Three open lectures on *Mental health, personality and a good life* were held for the general public in the evening. Local performers provided music and drama as a background for the lectures.

Suitable premises with well-functioning technical equipment were vital to the quality of the events. Altogether 582 people participated, 282 during the day and 300 in the evening. People enjoyed the events, and particularly appreciated being able to attend free lectures locally by professional experts. The diversity of participants reflected the large demand for such events.

### Subject literature and fiction

The project was successful and the collaboration worked well. We, organizers and participants, believe that this type of initiative can boost the library as a resource for healthcare professionals as well as for the general public who are given the opportunity to learn more about health. Being aware of the quality of information and

having a critical approach to sources is crucial.

Well-written fiction, related to mental health if possible, can provide patients and their families with insight, understanding and recognition, and may have a positive impact on those with health problems. Both subject literature and fiction constitute a resource in public health work.

### Unifying meeting arenas

Libraries profit from building networks, since this strengthens their position and their competence. Throughout the project we held constructive, interdisciplinary meetings that paved the way for closer cooperation in the future between libraries and healthcare professionals.

The project showed us that libraries can function as unifying meeting arenas for different groups of healthcare professionals. Every municipality has many different health actors that due to organizational variations do not necessarily have common professional arenas. We are of the opinion that bringing together actors in this way opens for further collaboration with the library sector.

So why not invest in this?

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