


International Perspectives and Initiatives

Abstract

This article is part of a new series in this regular feature. The series intend to serve as a road map by sharing expertise and drawing together trends that are relevant to both health science librarians and health informatics professionals. The present article is a collaboration of six medical and health sciences libraries in Belgium and the Flemish library and archive association (VVBAD, n.d., <https://www.vvbad.be/>). It aims to elucidate the extended, user-tailored approach provided by medical and health sciences libraries in Belgium motivated by the recent changes in user expectations and behaviour.

Keywords: education and training; Europe, Western; information literacy; libraries, health science; libraries, medical; professional associations; research data (management); review, systematic

Current and future directions in Belgian medical and health sciences librarianship: a user-tailored approach

Ann De Meulemeester , Heidi Buysse,
Renaat Peleman & Nele Pauwels
Knowledge Centre for Health Ghent, Ghent,
Belgium

Bérengère Schietse
Health Science Library, Université libre de
Bruxelles, Brussels, Belgium

Bruno Vermeeren

VVBAD, Antwerp, Belgium

Elke Ghesquière & Inge Discart

KU Leuven Libraries – 2Bergen, Leuven, Belgium

Ghislaine Declève

Library for Health Sciences, Université catholique
de Louvain, Brussels, Belgium

Katrien Alewaeters

Medical Library, Vrije Universiteit Brussel,
Brussels, Belgium

Nancy Durieux

Life Sciences Library, University of Liège, Liège,
Belgium

The Belgian health system

Belgium's health system is based on the principles of equal access and freedom of choice and is organised on two levels: federal and regional (Corens, Merkur, & Jemai, 2007). Health insurance is mandatory and is combined with a mostly private system of health care delivery, based on independent medical practice, free choice of physician and predominantly fee-for-service payment (Corens et al., 2007). Most Belgians have access to high-quality health care, mainly funded through social security contributions, taxes and health insurance funds. However, health inequalities continue to exist within the Belgian population due to socio-economic factors, financial difficulties and low use of preventive services (Corens et al., 2007; Vrijens et al., 2016).

The Belgian Health Care Knowledge Centre (KCE) conducts scientific research and advises policymakers on health care related topics (Belgian Health Care Knowledge Centre, n.d.; Vrijens et al., 2016). Various measures have been taken to improve the system's performance in recent decades. More emphasis has been placed on evidence-based health care, health care technology and economic evaluations (Corens et al., 2007), for example the development of a national plan for evidence-based practice (Adriaenssens et al., 2017). Together with governmental policy initiatives, the support provided by medical and health sciences libraries and research institutes has changed and extended over the years. For example, CEBAM (Belgian Centre for Evidence-Based Medicine and Belgian Branch of the Dutch Cochrane Collaboration (CEBAM), n.d.) raised awareness about evidence-based medicine among both health

care practitioners and consumers and encouraged its practice. The CEBAM Digital Library for Health facilitates access to objective medical and paramedical scientific information for Belgian health care workers (Belgian Centre for Evidence-Based Medicine and Belgian Branch of the Dutch Cochrane Collaboration (CEBAM), n.d.)

The medical and health sciences libraries' context in Belgium

Medical university libraries in Belgium are often located at a hospital campus and support both the university and the hospital. There is no large scientific medical hospital library, and there are no clinical librarians.

Unfortunately, librarianship education is often limited to an associate degree that focuses on librarianship and information management in general. Moreover, some education has recently been discontinued due mainly to financial cutbacks, for example the masters degree in 'Library and Information Sciences' in Flanders, the Flemish region of Belgium, and the masters called 'Diplôme d'Etude Spécialisée en Documentation et en Sciences de l'Information' in the Walloon region of Belgium. Budgetary restrictions have not only had an impact on library education but also threaten libraries themselves. Library staff need to be flexible and adapt to the ever-increasing digitisation of information and its effects on the physical organisation.

Changes in user expectations and behaviour

The digitisation of information has created new needs related to the use of a health sciences library. Moreover, it has changed the expectations and the behaviour of library users. The abundance, variety and variable quality of information require a more user-oriented approach: user-specific training, a user-driven website and support are needed, more than ever.

Some university library services develop activities in 'medical humanities'. The library, for example, may enrich its book collection with literature (e.g. novels, poetry and theatre), host art

exhibitions on health topics (e.g. anatomy, pain and migrations) and lead Think Tank workshops based on extracts of films or novels. The aim is to stimulate personal as well as collective reflections among the students about the job they have chosen (e.g. practitioner and physiotherapist) and contribute to the building of their professional identity.

Belgian health sciences libraries still fulfil traditional expectations such as acquiring, organising, storing, retrieving and disseminating quality information and publishing. For example, library users come to the library with all kinds of questions regarding information and documentation: how to search it, how to find it, how to read it, how to produce it (and to write it) and how to publish it. Librarians also continue to focus on curriculum-integrated information, literacy education for students and on the development of workshops, training and customised assistance for researchers. In addition to this, they are providing support in new areas such as research data management (RDM).

Repurposing library space

As is the case with many other academic libraries, technological and educational developments have had an impact on the physical library space of health libraries. Many Belgian university libraries have transitioned from a more reader and book/journal focused configuration to a model where learning is central and where library staff are working as trainers rather than just as service suppliers. The physical library has evolved into a more social environment where students gather to learn and work on group assignments. New user demands include quiet spaces to study, group rooms to work together and areas to gather and socialise, all of them of course comfortable, offering fast Wi-fi and the necessary power sockets to charge and use mobile devices (Montgomery, 2014). In addition to responding to new physical and technological needs, the transformation of the physical library into a place of quiet study and work also results in a need for extended opening hours, especially just before and during examination periods. It nevertheless remains essential to safeguard the balance between the library as a repository of information and its role as a learning centre.

Due to digitisation and the consequent diminution of the physical library collection, researchers rarely visit the library to consult literature nowadays. This fact makes it more and more difficult for library staff to meet researchers in person and to keep up to date with their work and their needs. Organising events specifically aimed at this target group can be a way to remedy this situation. Some Belgian libraries organise networking events for researchers. These events offer the opportunity to provide them with customised information provided by experts in the field and to exchange best practices on challenging topics for the 21st century researcher (e.g. RDM, research visibility, open access, financing and information skills).

Challenges facing library staff

The user-oriented provision of information through new technologies and the integration of information literacy (IL) within education have created new challenges with regard to the missions and tasks of librarians and hence staff recruitment. The library needs staff with new profiles, with differentiated experience covering interdisciplinary knowledge of librarianship, technology, research and education. Moreover, this work cannot be accomplished by the librarian alone but requires a team of collaborating experts supporting research, knowledge creation and knowledge sharing.

Supporting IL and IL research

Medical curricula nowadays place a great deal of emphasis on lifelong learning and IL skills. The library has therefore invested heavily in educational support with integrated IL courses, tailored information sessions and workshops. With growing student numbers and limited funding for staff, technology and resources, time management becomes ever more crucial for the IL expert. In an ideal situation, IL training consists not only of instruction but also entails doing – for example writing a search report – in combination with (interdisciplinary) student peer review. Reading all those search reports is, however, very time-consuming. Providing teach-the-teacher sessions

and update sessions could be a way to decrease this burden (De Meulemeester, Peleman, & Buysse, 2019). Furthermore, as well as ensuring the acquisition of basic IL skills, IL should also be integrated into the more specialised courses (vertical integration) and should finally become part of lifelong learning (Buysse, Peleman, & De Meulemeester, 2018).

Some libraries invest in IL research, using the results to provoke educational changes. In this role, the library advises curriculum developers on how to integrate IL into the curriculum, a process in which communication between different actors is crucial. It is vital that members of the educational committees gain insight into how IL is incorporated into the different curricula. Integrating IL into curricula should not be limited to vertical integration (i.e. within the curriculum) but should be horizontal as well (i.e. across the curriculum), focusing on interdisciplinary education (Buysse et al., 2018).

Furthermore, IL research indirectly supports researchers. For example, Ghent University conducted a university-wide survey on IL self-efficacy in 2015, which offered a valuable insight into the users' needs at that moment. This has led to the organisation of several initiatives to address these needs (De Meulemeester, Pauwels, Peleman, & Buysse, 2016). The results showed, among others, a significant knowledge and skills gap among health researchers (including PhD students) regarding the handling of research data (De Meulemeester et al., 2016).

Librarians' role in RDM

Although it is clear that the academic library has a significant role to play when it comes to RDM, extending the library's role in this new domain requires new expertise, new partnerships and financial support. Additionally, the RDM support should keep a balance between generic and more discipline-specific aspects of RDM. RDM support differs between Belgian libraries due to time and financial constraints and differences in existing initiatives: university-wide or decentralised. The libraries' role can range from focusing on the provision of information and guidance tailored to health researchers (Pauwels, Mertens, Peleman, &

De Meulemeester, 2017) to situating RDM experts and data stewards in the library. Some libraries are also taking part in working groups to articulate their RDM policy and assist with its implementation.

Input into systematic reviews

It is estimated that over the last decade, there has been a threefold increase in published systematic reviews in biomedical research (Page et al., 2016). The exponentially growing number of systematic reviews has resulted in significantly increased requests for library support which puts even more pressure on already stretched library staff. The nature of the assistance varies among Belgian university libraries from creating search strategies in response to researchers' requests to supporting all aspects of the review (including quality assessment and meta-analysis). Nevertheless, given that this library service is still relatively unknown to the majority of its users, it needs to be advertised and promoted.

Conclusions

This overview of current directions in Belgian health librarianship shows that the demands on health libraries in Belgium have evolved and broadened, but financial support has not increased. While Belgian health sciences libraries still fulfil traditional expectations, in addition they continue to focus on curriculum-integrated IL education for students and on the customised training and support for researchers and are engaging in new areas. Library support in domains such as RDM and systematic review is still relatively unknown to Belgian users. The physical library has become the place to go to get documentation as well as to meet information, documentation and publishing specialists. Optimising educational and research processes requires financial support, research, expertise and collaboration. Such collaboration would be beneficial to users, team members, the library, the university and, as a consequence, the whole society. Furthermore, the library staff should take the opportunity to share its expertise during internal meetings with the university or hospital departments. Networking and active

participation in university working groups are crucial for the modern-day librarian.

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Conflict of Interest

None.

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For details on how to contribute to this feature
please contact:
Jeannette Murphy
Honorary Senior Research Fellow in Health
Informatics
The Farr Institute of Health Informatics Research
CHIME, University College London
222 Euston Road
London NW1 2DA, UK
E-mail: j.murphy@ucl.ac.uk
Twitter handle: @MurphyJeannette