

# Consumer Health Information: so much information, so little time

By Linda Howard.

## Introduction

Health questions from patrons of a variety of ages and backgrounds are common in many health settings. Most people with Internet access look for health information online. However, finding and evaluating health information on the Web is a skill that many patients lack, and librarians can provide critical assistance in guiding library users to reliable and useful information.

This session provided an overview on how to find and assess consumer-oriented health information, as well as tips and tricks specific to some common health concerns such as mental health, addictions, cancer, and complementary and alternative medicine. The presenters included four health science librarians, Vicki Lee, Beth Morrison, Megan Wiebe and Brooke Ballantyne Scott expertly convened by Devon Greyson.

## Highlights

Vicki Lee started the presentation with general information about consumer and patient health information. She explored some of the many reasons why patients and their families seek health information and some of the barriers that may arise when these individuals search for reliable health information.

Vicki identified seekers of consumer health information that include not only the patient, but also the family, friends and health professionals involved in direct care. She explored some of the advantages in providing patient health information, including anxiety reduction, greater compliance with therapeutic interventions, and greater patient satisfaction with health services.

Brooke Ballantyne Scott talked about some of the unique challenges arising with mental health patients. Stigma is a huge barrier. Mental health clients need to be handled with nonjudgmental and

flexible approaches, or their health information needs will go unmet. Megan Wiebe talked about some of the issues in providing complementary and alternative health information.

Megan identified several sources that provide information on herbs and alternative substances that are often sought after. She identified the need to refer patients on to specialists and the problems with unreliable information on the internet about alternative medicine. Beth Morrison, librarian at the BC Cancer Agency wrapped up the presentation with an overview of what the cancer patient is seeking. Beth pointed to the importance of the BC Cancer Agency web site and the particular areas specifically tailored for cancer patients and their families.

## Lessons learned

I found this presentation to be extremely useful and interesting. Each presenter provided a different window into a unique consumer health information seeker. Each consumer has unique needs and the challenge for the librarian is to try and remain as sensitive and open as possible when dealing with different patient and family needs. In addition, the librarian can play an important role in referring patients on to appropriate specialists.

## Conclusion

The consumer health panel presentation was engaging and had great educational value for BCLA delegates. The presenters each brought forward unique perspectives on addressing the varied health information needs of different patients and consumers and the important role librarians can play in the navigation process.

*Linda Howard is the librarian at Fraser Health Library Services based out of Surrey Memorial Hospital.  
[Linda.howard@fraserhealth.ca](mailto:Linda.howard@fraserhealth.ca)*