

The Health Crisis of the COVID-19 as a New Challenge for Hospital Libraries

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Summary

During the first half of 2020, the coronavirus pandemic upended the world. Having come forth from China in December 2019, the coronavirus soon caused the World Health Organization (WHO) to declare the outbreak as a “public health emergency of international concern” for the world on 30 January 2020. Until the present day, most countries have introduced lockdowns on human mobility as a measure of protecting their civilians from coming in contact with the virus. However, the true challenge many countries have to fight against is the global epidemic of misinformation that continues to run amok on social media platforms and other outlets. The biggest challenge in the COVID-19 crisis for librarians is to keep providing their usual services to library users. The role of academic health librarians now includes controlling fake information and providing authentic, updated information to health workers and the public.

1. INTRODUCTION

During the first half of 2020, the coronavirus pandemic upended the world. Its shocking spread and ravaging effects affected every region on earth. The coronavirus (also known as COVID-19) had dire global socioeconomic consequences as governments imposed harsh at times shutdowns, quarantines or curfews on their countries, citizens and overall daily life in an effort to prevent the expansion of the epidemic and restrain its numbers.

Having come forth from China in December 2019, the coronavirus soon caused the World Health Organization (WHO) to declare the outbreak as a “public health emergency of international concern” for the world on 30 January 2020 (WHO “statement on the second meeting of the International Health Regulations (2005) Emergency Committee regarding the outbreak of novel coronavirus (2019-nCoV)”, 2020). Within less than two months, on 11 March 2020, the WHO exclaimed that the spreading coronavirus was a global pandemic (WHO “WHO Director-General’s opening remarks at the media briefing on COVID-19 – 11 March 2020”, 2020). Until the present day most countries have introduced lockdowns on human mobility as a measure of protecting their civilians from coming in contact with the virus..According to the BBC, by the end of March 2020 more than 100 countries implemented either complete or partial lockdowns (BBC, 2020).

However, the true challenge many countries have to fight against is the global epidemic of misinformation that continues to run amok on social media platforms and other outlets. According to Zarocostas (2020), the World Health Organisation’s (WHO) Director-General, Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus, stated that “We’re not just fighting an epidemic; we’re fighting an infodemic”. Zarocostas (2020) notes that despite the rapid response to the (COVID-19) pandemic by WHO, it has become a commonality that every viral outbreak has a tendency of being followed closely by misinformation, gossip and rumors.

2. MISINFORMATION AND MEDICAL LIBRARIANS

As stated above, besides health challenges, the coronavirus has given rise to various rumors and fake information on social media platform (Shimizu, 2020; Tasnim, Hossain, & Mazumder, 2020). Newitz (2020) argues that video conferencing and video calling apps such as Zoom and Skype have become a necessity in home quarantine despite being unsecure and filled with fake and abusive information.

According to Gerber (2020) ‘as health professionals, medical librarians are sometimes considered essential personnel and therefore required to work, either onsite or remotely’. With the closure of physical spaces, librarians are working in virtual spaces to provide remote services, resources and support for research, innovation and

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public health in the current health crisis. The role of academic health librarians now includes controlling fake information and providing authentic, updated information to health workers and the public.

According to the International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions (IFLA, 2020) ‘Health librarians – working in hospitals, research centers and governments –have to deliver more than ever, even as they face the same restrictions and rules as everyone else’. However, the biggest challenge in the COVID-19 crisis for librarians is to keep providing their usual services to library users.

The three most important roles medical librarians mainly have to play during the COVID-19 pandemic are:

1. To provide awareness on preventive measures relating to COVID-19. As it stands, at the moment the key measures to prevent infection from COVID-19 are social distancing, use of masks and sanitizers and finally hand washing. Library associations and individual libraries have been designing posters to educate people regarding COVID-19. These posters aim to educate people on social distancing, the use of masks and proper sanitization.
2. To provide document delivery services during lockdown. As a result of lockdown in most countries, libraries are closed. Nevertheless some of them, such as the US Library of Congress, need to support their parent bodies and therefore remain open. A number of libraries are offering home delivery of documents and consequently sanitizing of documents has become a big concern. At present, no research has been conducted on the transmission of coronavirus through library document surfaces (such as book cloth, book jackets, coated and uncoated papers) which is a cause for concern amongst librarians. Northeast Document Conservation Center has released a series of guidelines for disinfecting books and other collections which will be helpful for the librarians who are working in the COVID-19 crisis (NEDCC, 2020) (<https://www.nedcc.org/free-resources/preservation-leaflets/3-emergency-management/3.5-disinfecting-books>).
3. To support researchers working on COVID-19. Access to the right information at the right time is critical for researchers working on COVID-19. Various publishers are offering free access to e-content on the matter constantly. Librarians can use these databases to download information related to the research interests of their researchers, research teams, faculty members and health workers. As such, librarians have a key role to play as the quantity of information explodes. Coren (2020) observes that the scientific papers on COVID-19 are doubling every 14 days. Another study by Reuters reveals that due to the pace at which academic papers on COVID-19 are being published, said papers are not always peer reviewed, which can lead to false, or at least inaccurate information being published (Sharma, Scarr, & Kelland, 2020). By using keywords and other tools at their disposal, librarians have the skills to monitor recent publications and provide the most reliable papers to researchers.

3. CONCLUSION

A pandemic like that of SARS- COV2, of such proportions has taken the world by storm and naturally demands the attention of the entirety of the medical community. As a result, all types of medical and paramedical professions are inexorably drawn to the common cause of battling the spread of the disease any further. In the current health crisis created by COVID-19, the role of librarians has expanded significantly out of the sheer necessity for more information. Librarians are playing crucial roles from generating awareness, filtering fake information, supporting researchers and faculty members, to providing reference and document delivery services. Library professionals have always been committed to providing people with information and during the pandemic they are finding even more new ways to support their mission.

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