

Chapter 19

Role of Libraries in Promoting Health Information Literacy in India

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ABSTRACT

Good health is essential for every human being. Health information is essential for maintaining good health, preventing diseases as well as making sound health decisions. People can only be able to access, utilize, and benefit from healthcare services if they have proper information about these services. It is here that health information literacy comes into play. The information related to every aspect of health is easily available today, but the main problem here lies in finding, selecting, and using relevant health information and preventing misinformation. Libraries have a pivotal role to play here. This chapter is mainly concerned with identifying the gaps in the provision of health information to the general public and the role of health information literacy in paving the way of filling up these gaps. It will be helpful in knowing the current standing of public and medical libraries in providing health information resources and services. It will also suggest the role of these libraries of India in promoting health information literacy among their respective user communities.

INTRODUCTION

Good health is essential for every human being. Health and health care are regarded as one of the fundamental human rights as World Health Organization states that “the enjoyment of the highest attainable standard of health is one of the fundamental rights of every human being without distinction of race, religion, political belief, economic or social condition.” For the transformation and sustainable development of the world, 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) were formulated, and “ensuring

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healthy lives and promoting the well-being for all at all ages is essential to sustainable development” is considered as the SDG 3 (<https://www.un.org/sustainabledevelopment/health/>). To attain good health and well-being, we need health information. According to the National Economic and Social Rights Initiative “health information must be easily accessible for everyone, enabling people to protect their health and claim quality health services”. Health information is essential for maintaining good health, preventing diseases as well as making sound health decisions.

Over 800 million people around the world are spending 10% of their household budgets on their healthcare expenses which pushes them into extreme poverty (World Health Organisation, n.d.). Also, 50% of the world’s population does not have access to essential healthcare services which is eventually hindering the social and economic progress of many countries especially the developing ones (*Half the world lacks access to essential health services – UN-backed report, 2017*). Globally, 70% of the total deaths are caused by non-communicable diseases (World Health Organisation, 2020). The burden of non-communicable diseases is also worsening the prevailing Coronavirus (popularly known as CoVID-19) pandemic as people suffering from non-communicable diseases are more vulnerable to CoVID-19. Non-communicable diseases are also a major challenge in achieving the Sustainable Development Goals in general and SDG 3 in particular. Also, Sustainable Development Goal 3.4 is committed to “reduce one-third of global premature mortality from non-communicable diseases by preventing and treating them”. As non-communicable diseases are preventable and treatable, timely and accurate health information from relevant and authentic health information resources can help make sound decisions related to health which can surely help in the prevention and self-treatment of many of these diseases. This accurate and relevant information is the key to good health and well-being. People can only be able to access, utilize and benefit from healthcare services if they have proper information about these services. It is here that Health Information Literacy (HIL) comes into play. Libraries have a pivotal role to play in providing health information to stakeholders and expanding health information literacy for the physical and mental health of one and all.

The purpose of this chapter is to identify the gaps in the provision of health information to the general public and the role of health information literacy. It emphasizes the importance of health information literacy in the current era as well as the existing CoVID-19 pandemic situation where people are becoming more concerned about their health. Also, this chapter provides information about the current standing of public and medical libraries in India in providing health information resources and services, health awareness, and promoting health information literacy among the public, patients, and healthcare professionals. It also suggests the role of these libraries of India in promoting health information literacy among their respective user communities.

BACKGROUND AND LITERATURE REVIEW

Health Information Literacy as defined by the Medical Library Association is “the set of abilities needed to recognize a health information need; identify likely information sources and use them to retrieve relevant information; assess the quality of information and its applicability to a specific situation; and analyze, understand, and use the information to make good health decision”. Health Information Literacy is essential for seeking preventive health, appropriate management of disease, and improving the wellbeing of citizens as a whole. The various reasons which necessitate that people are empowered with HIL are:

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