Transitioning from Print to Online– Only Resources:
The Experience of a Medium–Sized Healthcare Organization Library

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Pacific Health Organization's Medical Library transitioned from its holdings being entirely in print to entirely online in an extremely short time span—the bulk of the process happened in less than six months. Leadership interests and support drove this transition, as did cost concerns and the interest in providing equal access to a geographically dispersed staff. Flexible staff that was able to adapt to new roles and a robust interlibrary loan system made the change possible. There were initial costs, but on the whole, there were mostly benefits to the change, financial and otherwise. Patron reception was more negative among those with less comfort in the digital environment, but most adjusted well. Ongoing challenges include marketing and maintaining patron awareness without a physical space, meeting user expectations for quick and easy access and information, and keeping up to date with emerging technologies, such as applications for mobile devices.

ORGANIZATION BACKGROUND

Pacific Health Organization (not its real name, and henceforth referred to as PHO) is a large west coast health cooperative. A health cooperative is similar to a health maintenance organization, but is consumer-governed and in some cases, consumer-owned. Members purchase insurance plans from PHO that cover all of their medical needs within the one system; in this model, prevention of illness and chronic conditions is a major focus of care. PHO has more than 500,000 members, approximately 3,000 health care providers and 7,000 additional staff, and provides services in upwards of 50 clinics located across a wide geographic area. It was an early adopter of moving from paper to solely electronic patient medical records, and has a robust research institute as well, which informs the health care practice of providers.

PHO has had a medical library since its inception, soon after World War II. Its mission is to serve the clinical delivery system (basically, patient care); this mission informs collection development and library policies. The library serves the entire organization staff of 10,000, but focuses on the 3,000 staff members who are health care providers and have questions relating to patient care. The Medical Library does not provide patient or consumer information, and with some minor exceptions, it does not support the information needs of the research institute.

The Medical Library is part of the PHO Clinical Improvement department, and there are four steps between the medical librarian and the organization's CEO. The PHO Medical Library, with three staff members serving 10,000 total staff of which 3,000 are health care providers, can be considered a medium-sized health care library. There are few medical libraries similar to the size of PHO; usually, hospitals and health care organizations either support small libraries with a solo librarian, or large academically affiliated libraries with many staff members. Many processes, in particular publisher and vendor negotiation, are very different for smaller, free-standing organization-based special libraries than they are for larger academic libraries, which can draw on economies of scale and pricing, as well as a wider range of staff competencies (Tucker & Holley, 2004).

SETTING THE STAGE

At the time of the decision to make the transition from print to digital, in 2005, the Medical Library had three staff members, with a manager overseeing them and the library. Staff members included a librarian (who was not in favor of moving to online resources), Web developer who also had collection development responsibilities, and library technician who did document delivery and clerical work.

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