



Improving Access to Information: Librarians and Nurses Team Up for Patient Safety

Executive Summary

- ▶ Access to information plays a key role in providing safe patient care.
- ▶ Opportunities for nurses to improve access to literature exist through working with a medical librarian.
- ▶ Nurse executives, nurse administrators, and frontline nursing personnel can ensure better access to information by seeking out the hospital librarian to strategize about patient safety improvements.



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"The time has come to invest in the creation of a more effective infrastructure for the application of knowledge to health care delivery" (Institute of Medicine [IOM], 2001, p. 14).

EFFICIENT AND TIMELY access to evidence-based medical literature is an important element in providing safe patient care (IOM, 2001). This knowledge base exists in primary sources such as the medication administration records and patients' medical records, from colleagues, and, ideally, in the science reported in the biomedical literature. Given the complexity and time constraints involved in care delivery, seeking out the right information at the right time is an increasingly difficult goal for many health practitioners to reach.



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ACKNOWLEDGMENT: Special thanks to Diane Hummell, MLIS, and Sandra Kommit Dahlman, MILS, BA, RN, of the Spectrum Health Libraries, and Cathy Tokarski for their editorial guidance.

Frontline nurses are no exception to this dilemma. A key role for management, therefore, is to help improve access to evidence-based literature for nurses to enable them to interact more proactively for safety. Key to improving access to evidence from biomedical literature is the medical reference librarian or clinical librarian. Nurses and patients both benefit from a partnership between nurses and librarians.

Close Yet So Far Away

Less-than-reliable behaviors and situations plague the busy clinician. Traditionally, nurses rely on interpersonal contact and personal experience more than either print or online resources to resolve questions about patient care (Estabrooks, O'Leary, Ricker, & Humphrey, 2003). While this method may often provide correct information, it may not necessarily reflect the most current thinking or be consistent with evidence. Even if resources are convenient and free of charge, such as the National Library of Medicine's access to MEDLINE, nurses report barriers to using the Web due to lack of administrative support and negative attitudes toward computers (Estabrooks et al., 2003). In addition, some of the reference material readily available at nursing stations is inadequately maintained and may contribute to errors (Golz & Fitchett, 1999). Librarians can play a role in mitigating the potential for failure associated with using outdated resources by managing resource purchasing reliably as they do for corporations, law firms, and other information-rich environments.

The nurse administrator is a key person in establishing the partnership between the nursing staff and the medical librarian. In response to the increased emphasis on safety, nurse leaders may need to gain new competencies in patient safety culture development that may have been lacking in previous education or experience. Knowledge supporting this professional growth isn't necessarily available through traditional clinical information tools. Collecting this specialized body of literature requires expert access to publications focusing in business, human factors, and organizational learning. A skilled and accomplished information professional (medical librarian) can play a substantial part in acquiring and disseminating this information.

Enhancing Access

Access to information is essential to education, which empowers nurses to become active participants in error-reduction strategies and to identify potential problems before harm occurs. Efficient access to the full range of biomedical literature means having searchable online access or, even better, building relation-

ships with the gatekeepers to this knowledge base. Often this role is filled by a medical librarian.

Nursing is highly complex and labor intensive (Lanham, 2003). Nurses are dealing with increased patient loads and with increased technological complexity in an environment designed with efficiency — not safety — in mind (Sokol & Cummins, 2002). Enhancing health care delivery to be consistent with scientific evidence and patient-safety principles means building platforms for sharing information and developing a more informed workforce, yet without drawing on already taxed schedules. Given these realities, facilitating access to key literature should be a management-driven initiative.

A nurse's specialized knowledge isn't expected to include the expertise of search and retrieval from the extensive resources of medical literature. The volume of literature that a nurse would encounter after undertaking a search-and-retrieval project would likely be overwhelming (Gonneman, 2003). The challenge becomes being able to quickly select and evaluate just what is needed from numerous sources, databases, and Web sites (Pyne, Newman, Leigh, Cowling, & Rounce, 1999).

Nurse administrators can establish partnerships with a medical librarian to help staff contribute to the safety of patients through improved access to the evidence. Hersh et al. (2002) showed that even with fast connectivity and access to online databases (Ovid, Pubmed, and CINAHL), nurse practitioner students and medical residents who were given online research training had difficulty efficiently and correctly performing a search in a study emulating the effort to practice evidence-based medicine. Expertise in refining the search question and then producing and evaluating relevant results rests with the medical librarian.

Nurses believe that safety should be a proactive issue, and that they must recognize the potential for error before it becomes a reality (Sokol & Cummins, 2002). A missing piece preventing this insight from being incorporated into medical practice is access to information at the site of health care delivery. "...a fundamental responsibility for patient safety will always rest with the health care professional" (White, 2002, p. 195). Because that information could mean the difference between safe care and harmful error, practitioners and administrators alike should invest effort in resolving this gap.

A nurse doing an intake interview with a newly admitted patient with multiple diagnoses, for example, may find an unfamiliar diagnosis and treatment plan. Medications may be ordered that are unfamiliar or are in unusual combinations or doses. While not all questions are resolved at the outset of treatment, the earlier in the care process that information to address questions is available, the greater the likelihood that care will be safe and patient centered (tailored to an individual patient's unique needs). In a 1991 multicenter

Table 1.
How Hospital Librarians Assist Nurses in Their Information Needs

- ✓ On-demand literature research and document delivery for patient care.
- ✓ Support for educational activities.
- ✓ Run a nursing journal club.
- ✓ Internet and search training.
- ✓ Promote evidence-based medicine for clinicians.
- ✓ Help with access to mandatory CE programs.
- ✓ Create and maintain project or area-specific intranet sites.
- ✓ Locate and purchase books needed.
- ✓ Work directly with patients that are referred to the library by nurses.

Source: The Medical Library Associations/Medical librarians discussion list (MEDLIB) query (2003, April).

study, care improved when clinicians were provided with the evidence base (Marshall, 1992). Physicians were asked to request from the medical librarian some information related to a current clinical case and evaluate its impact on patient care. Eighty percent reported that they handled some aspect of patient care differently than they would have without the librarian's assistance (Marshall, 1992).

In another scenario, Gonneman (2003) described access to the medical reference librarian by nurses in the emergency department when there is a difference of treatment opinion among staff. Medical librarians have a specialized skill set to complement those of practitioners. They have knowledge of online databases and understand the logic of advanced search techniques that deliver precise, relevant results more efficiently than can be done by an amateur. Medical librarians are experts at refining the search question; the reference interview narrows (or sometimes expands) the search to get at the real question. Librarians understand the need to evaluate sources for credibility and reliability. Through personal contact with the nursing staff, they can proactively provide awareness alerts about advances in the field and highlight professional reading relevant to safety or other specific issues related to the staff's distinct needs. (See Table 1 for examples from the field of ways hospital librarians assist nurses in their information needs.)

Improved Knowledge

One of the tenets of patient safety is to involve all employees in a hospital's quest to improve safety and build the rich culture that supports it. If nurses typically rely on face-to-face (Estabrooks et al., 2002) and personal experience, or even if they find time to consult nursing journals and/or the CINAHL database, they remain on unequal footing with other practitioners