

The Use of Search Request Forms Can Identify Gaps in a Consumer Health Library Collection

Giannopoulos, E., Snow, M., Manley, M., McEwan, K., Stechkevich, A., Giuliani, M. E., & Papadakos, J. (2021). Identifying gaps in consumer health library collections: A retrospective review. *Journal of the Medical Library Association: JMLA*, 109(4), 656–666. <https://doi.org/10.5195/jmla.2021.895>

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Evidence Summary

The Use of Search Request Forms Can Identify Gaps in a Consumer Health Library Collection

A Review of:

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Abstract

Objective – The objective of this study was to determine if search request forms, which are used when a patron’s request for information cannot be fulfilled at the time of contact with the library team, can be used to identify gaps in consumer health library collections while offering some explanation for the gaps.

Design – Retrospective case study of search request forms.

Setting – A consumer health library at an academic cancer center in Canada.

Subjects – Library patrons: Patients, Patient family, other members of the center, and unspecified.

Methods – The researchers reviewed 260 search request forms submitted between 2013 and 2020. Of those, 249 records met inclusion criteria and were analyzed and coded. Coding included patron type, cancer diagnosis, information delivery, and content themes. This information was then used to identify gaps in the library collection and the reasons for the gaps.

Main Results – Patients were the primary patrons, asking 62.9% of the questions, followed by family members at 22.5%. The most common cancer type researched was breast at 23.3%, then hematology at 16.5%. gynecology, gastrointestinal, genitourinary, and sarcoma were next between 10% and 8.4%. The remaining cancer types ranged between 6.0 % and 2.0%, with brain being the lowest. Of the questions asked, 60% revealed a gap in the collection. The gaps included rare cancer diagnosis, treatment options, and prognosis. There were data collected on why the information was unavailable. While 53% of the gaps were a result of limited health consumer information, 25% were a result of paywall restrictions or content restricted to members.

Conclusion – Search request forms can be an effective tool in evaluating gaps in collections. In this study, the researchers were able to identify that breast cancer patients made up the most significant proportion of patrons, and the biggest gaps in the collection were related to their treatment decisions. One opportunity to bridge this gap is through collaboration with clinical teams in developing patient friendly resources on this topic. In addition, inter-institutional collaboration between libraries may also help. Continued review of forms can help inform collection decisions to better meet the needs of patrons.

Commentary

Consumer health libraries play a significant role in helping cancer patients navigate the over-abundance of information available. They provide reliable information to help with treatment, prognosis, and diagnosis. The collections at these libraries need to be accurate and readily available. However, collection development is a complex and challenging part of librarianship, especially when considering factors like use, budget, and reliability. There are a variety of procedures and policies used to assist librarians, but they are focused on the quality of the content, for example, relevance, credibility, currency, and so on (Papadacos et al., 2014). In this study, Giannopoulos et al. (2021) offered an interesting mode for assessing gaps in a consumer health library at a cancer institute by analyzing search requests.

The Glynn (2006) critical appraisal tool was used to evaluate this study. Giannopoulos et al. (2021) clearly described data collection; however, they did not mention where the data was stored, nor gave an example of the mentioned search request form. The researchers did mention that the data will not be made available due to personally identifiable information. They clearly identified inclusion/exclusion criteria, namely requests unrelated to cancer were excluded. The data they provided is detailed and well-presented.

The conclusions Giannopoulos et al. (2021) reached would be helpful for their specific institution. They identified gaps in their collections that fail to meet the needs of their patrons. In addition, they also explored why these gaps existed and offered some interesting solutions, such as collaboration among institutions to develop their own consumer health information. That could potentially fill gaps in collections outside the collaborators and may serve as a model for future projects. The paywall restrictions unfortunately are more difficult to overcome, but they only made up 25% of the reasons for gaps.

However, Giannopoulos et al.'s (2021) study cannot be generalized to other libraries yet. The population was not large enough to make general conclusions. A follow up study involving multiple institutions utilizing the same search request form could provide more significant insight. Overall, this was an

interesting study that offered a novel approach to collection development. Utilizing search request forms for collection gap analysis should be explored further.

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