What is an Informationist?  
Lauren Sweet  
School of Information Science and Learning Technologies, University of Missouri

Definition

An informationist:
- Has a Masters in Library Science and another advanced degree, typically in the sciences
- Works as part of a clinical care team
- Accompanies physicians on patient rounds
- Synthesizes and evaluates information
- Anticipates client needs
- Participates in patient outreach
- “[...] merges the knowledge and expertise of a health care professional with the information retrieval skills of a librarian.” (Polger, 2010)

- The term was proposed by Drs. Frank Davidoff and Valerie Florance in their 2000 article, “The Informationist: A New Health Profession!” to replace the concept of “clinical librarianship.”
- The Medical Library Association (MLA) held an Informationist Conference at the National Library of Medicine in 2002 to discuss the validity of the informationist concept. Attendees of the conference agreed that the role of the informationist role fills a “critical need,” but competencies need to be identified and defined more clearly.

Variety of Terms

The variety of terms in library literature used to describe librarian roles in medical libraries can be overwhelming. Some of these terms are synonymous, while others mean very different things.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variety of Terms</th>
<th>Medical Librarian Terms</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Medical informationist</td>
<td>Health information manager</td>
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<tr>
<td>Knowledge manager</td>
<td>Knowledge worker</td>
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<td>Clinical knowledge worker</td>
<td>Evidence educator</td>
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<td>Information specialist in (MLA)</td>
<td>Generalist medical librarian</td>
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<td>Biomedical librarian</td>
<td>Inforamtionan</td>
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<td>Decision-support specialist</td>
<td>Clinical medical librarian</td>
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<td>General medical librarian</td>
<td>NYU School of Medicine</td>
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<tr>
<td>Vanderbilt University</td>
<td>ANNALS OF INTERNAL MEDICINE</td>
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<tr>
<td>NIH Library informationist</td>
<td>Clinical librarian/Informationist: Past, present, future. Journal of Hospital Librarianship, 6(2), 65-73. doi: 10.1300/J186v06n02_07</td>
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Discussion

The MLA and others have determined that informationists can provide value to physicians and patients in a health care setting. The advantages of having an informationist include:
- Easier access to librarians for physicians
- Reduced time to submit queries
- Improved communication between librarians and clinical care teams
- Improved patient care
- Increased awareness of library resources

Informationists can potentially fill a void in a health care setting’s information needs, but questions about the position remain. Some of the problems surrounding the position include:
- Do informationists perform the same duties as general medical librarians? Where is the added value? Is the setting the only difference?
- Could pharmacists be trained to evaluate information like a librarian and act in the same capacity as informationists?
- Who should pay for informationists’ advanced education?
- How can we determine how useful this role is without funding its development?
- What types of training should be required for informationists?
- Should all informationists have the same training?

Where Can They Be Found?

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- The National Institutes of Health (NIH) established its Informationist Program in 2001.
- As of September 2012, the Program has 16 informationists serving 108 different groups at the NIH and the Department of Health and Human Services.
- Large teaching hospitals affiliated with academic institutions
- Universities
- Examples:
  - New York University School of Medicine
  - Vanderbilt University
  - Washington University

The Future

Questions remain about the validity of the role of the informationist and the logistics of the profession. Below are some possible future directions and questions for the informationist role:
- Standardizing expected credentials and training
- Establishing a licensed informationist program
- Funding – will hospitals and other health care institutions deem the position important enough to provide consistent funding?
- Malpractice accountability – how and to what extent should informationists be held accountable?
- Matching library needs to roles
- Offering additional electives outside of library schools to provide for some of the advanced training required to be an informationist
- Partnering library schools with other schools to offer dual master’s degree programs, particularly in the areas of computer science and health/medicine
- Evolving and adapting positions – will general medical librarians evolve to become more like informationists, or will the roles remain distinct?

References


Contact Information

Lauren Sweet  
School of Information Science  
and Learning Technologies, University of Missouri  
les437@missouri.edu  
lauren.e.sweet@gmail.com