Evidence Based Library and Information Practice

Evidence Summary

Training May Affect Primary Care Staff Access to the Biomedical Electronic Evidence Base

A review of:
Doney, Liz, Helen Barlow, and Joe West. "Use of Libraries and Electronic Information Resources by Primary Care Staff: Outcomes from a Survey." Health Information and Libraries Journal 22.3 (September 2005): 182-188.

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Received: 14 December 2005 **Accepted:** 14 February 2006

Abstract

Objective – To assess use of existing local libraries, the Internet, and biomedical databases by primary care staff prior to implementation of the Primary Care Knowledge Management Projects. Additionally, to assess the need to train primary care staff to use the Internet and biomedical databases.

Design – Cross-sectional postal questionnaire survey.

Setting – Nottingham and Rotherham, two cities in the Trent region of the UK.

Subjects – Questionnaires were analyzed from 243 general practitioners, practice nurses, and practice managers in four Nottingham primary care trusts as well as practices in the Rotherham Health Authority area.

Methods – Questionnaires and cover letters were sent between May 2001 and February 2002. To encourage response, a postage-paid envelope was enclosed. A total of 709 questionnaires were sent in Nottingham, and 169 were returned for a response rate of 24%. In Rotherham, 179 questionnaires were sent and 61 returned, for a 34% response rate. Thirteen responses from a May 2001 pilot in Rotherham were also included in the data analysis. Survey questions included a variety of formats, including tick boxes and open-ended questions. Data was entered into an Access database and analysis was performed using Stata software.

Main results – Reported use of libraries was low overall, with only 30% of respondents

claiming to have used library facilities. However, there was significant variation among professional groups. Practice nurses (PNs) had significantly higher usage of libraries than general practitioners (GPs) and practice managers ($P < 0.01$). Overall, 81% of the respondents used the Internet for work, with no significant variation by group. Forty-four percent reported using biomedical databases, with some significant variation. GPs and PNs reported higher usage of databases than practice managers ($P < 0.01$). The most common reported barrier to using both the Internet and biomedical databases was lack of training. GPs more frequently cited lack of time as a barrier to using biomedical databases ($P = 0.04$). Over half of all respondents reported an interest in Internet training, and over 60% reported an interest in database search training. A significantly lower number of practice managers wanted database training ($P = 0.02$).

Conclusion – Based on the results of this admittedly small study, additional training is needed – and desired – by primary care staff in both Nottingham and Rotherham. Developing and offering training in Internet searching and evaluation as well as use of the biomedical databases is one important way in which libraries can build partnerships with primary care practitioners. This will also enable added numbers of primary care staff to access and use the clinical evidence knowledge base. Additional studies are needed to identify and overcome barriers to training.

Commentary

This survey reinforces the conclusions of similar studies (Bellman et al.; Cogdill et al.; Dawes and Sampson) about the use of knowledge-based resources by physicians; namely, that time and training are barriers to Internet and database usage. Unlike the other studies, lack of training was a larger factor than lack of time. This may result from the inclusion of groups other than physicians in this study, or it may represent a significant finding. Regardless, this is an outcome on which further research may shed some light. Training requires time. If a respondent does not currently use libraries, would she actually attend a library-sponsored training session?

The survey itself was not provided, and the actual questions were not reproduced within the article. Therefore, the instrument could not be evaluated. We do not know if respondents were asked about public libraries, health services libraries, or whether a distinction was made within the survey. We also do not know how library "use" was defined, if at all. Lack of question clarity could skew responses about library use. It was also difficult to evaluate responses related to Internet access without viewing the survey questions. If respondents were not asked about Internet use at home, but do use it at home for work-related purposes, would this have an effect upon responses related to access?

The study response rate was low, which mirrors physician response rates in other postal surveys. The fact that these practitioners responded may mean that they are more interested in informatics issues than the average GP or practice nurse. The study authors do acknowledge this possible response bias, which indicate that conclusions about the need and desire for training might not apply to the entire primary care population of Nottingham and Rotherham.

This study presents a fairly complete snapshot of electronic resource use by GPs, practice nurses, and practice managers in the Trent region. It also reinforces the findings of previous studies by outlining barriers to using electronic resources. However, the study neglects to explore one

of its three objectives: use of existing local libraries. Do local libraries currently offer Internet and database training? If so, are primary care practitioners aware of these training opportunities? This is a crucial area for future research in this region, as well as for any library that offers resources and services to a clinical population.

Works Cited

Bellman, Philip, et al. "Facilitating physician access to medical reference information." The Permanente Journal 9.4 (Fall 2005): 27-32.

Cogdill, Keith W., et al. "Information needs and information seeking in community medical education." Academic Medicine 75.5 (May 2000): 484-86.

Dawes, Martin, and Uchechukwu Sampson. "Knowledge management in clinical practice: a systematic review of information seeking behavior in physicians." International Journal of Medical Informatics 71.1 (August 2003): 9-15.