



# MEETING INFORMATION NEEDS IN HEALTH POLICY AND PUBLIC HEALTH: PRIORITIES FOR THE NATIONAL LIBRARY OF MEDICINE AND THE NATIONAL NETWORK OF LIBRARIES OF MEDICINE

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**ABSTRACT** Those seeking information in health policy and public health are not as well served as those seeking clinical information. Problems inhibiting access to health policy and public health information include the heterogeneity of professionals seeking the information, the distribution of relevant information across disciplines and information sources, scarcity of synthesized information useful to practitioners, lack of awareness of available services or training in their use, and lack of access to information technology or to knowledgeable librarians and information specialists. Since 1990, the National Library of Medicine and the National Network of Libraries of Medicine have been working to enhance information services in health policy and public health through expanding the coverage of the NLM collection, building new databases, and engaging in targeted outreach and training initiatives directed toward segments of the health policy and public health communities. Progress has been made, but more remains to be done. Recommendations arising from the meeting, *Accessing Useful Information: Challenges in Health Policy and Public Health*, will help NLM and the National Network of Libraries of Medicine to establish priorities and action plans for the next several years.

## INTRODUCTION

The mission of the National Library of Medicine (NLM) is "to assist the advancement of medical and related sciences and to aid the dissemination and exchange of scientific and other information important to the progress of medicine and to the public health."<sup>1</sup> To carry out this mission, NLM acquires, organizes, and

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preserves the world's largest collection of scholarly literature in medicine and health; builds bibliographic and factual databases, including MEDLINE, GenBank, and environmental health data banks; provides reference and research assistance as a back-up to services provided by health sciences libraries across the US; and coordinates the National Network of Libraries of Medicine (NN/LM), a network of about 4,500 US health sciences libraries, which cooperate to equalize access to information for health professionals irrespective of their geographic locations. NLM also conducts and funds research on advanced applications of computer and information science to biomedicine and health and supports the development of the national information infrastructure, including advanced telecommunications networks and enabling public policy in such areas as standards, confidentiality, and intellectual property rights.

Health policy and public health information clearly fall within NLM's scope, and the Library's collection and services cover considerable published literature and data in these fields.\* Many other health sciences libraries across the US also have collections and services that include information related to health policy and public health. Yet, few would argue that those seeking health policy or public health information are as well served as those seeking information relevant to clinical care or basic biomedical research. There is a dearth of formal studies of information needs and information-seeking behavior in health policy and public health, but available evidence suggests that many factors inhibit access.† The problems include wide diversity in the education and backgrounds of those seeking the information; the distribution of relevant information among many disciplines and information sources, including many outside the mainstream scientific literature; lack of synthesized information that is directly useful in practice; lack of awareness of available information services; lack of training in the use of information services; and, particularly in the public health workforce, lack of access to librarians and information specialists and to Web-capable computers and Internet connections.

#### THE ROLE OF LIBRARIES

Improving access to information in health policy and public health will require collaborative action involving those working in these fields; professional associa-

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\*See, in this issue of the *Journal of Urban Health*, M. A. Cahn, C. R. Selden, and I. Auston, Web-based resources for retrieving health policy information: NLM and beyond; and N. Rambo, Information resources for public health practice.

†For examples, see, in this issue of the *Journal of Urban Health*, P. W. O'Carroll, M. A. Cahn, I. Auston, and C. R. Selden, Information needs in public health and health policy: Results of recent studies; and B. H. Gray, Sources used in health policy research and implications for information retrieval systems.

tions; local, state, and federal government agencies; educational institutions; and library and information service providers. While others focus on such issues as the lack of published expert syntheses, the NLM and NN/LM are concentrating on (1) developing better library and information services relevant to health policy and public health and (2) helping health policy and public health workers to make more effective use of the information services that are available.

#### **BETTER LIBRARY AND INFORMATION SERVICES**

A first step toward improving library and information service in health policy and public health is to improve the coverage of related publications in physical and electronic library "collections" and in on-line catalogs and indexes. Information that is directly relevant to health policy or public health issues is found not only in health-related publications, but also in the general literature of economics, law, political science, sociology, statistics, public administration, engineering, and other disciplines. Because health policy and public health are so multidisciplinary, no single US national library or information service currently assumes responsibility for all relevant scholarly publications. This is unlikely to change, although NLM, the Library of Congress, and the National Agricultural Library will continue to cooperate to ensure that all the relevant subjects are covered in at least one of the national collections. NLM is working to improve its collection and indexing coverage of the policy and public health literature that does fall within its scope. NLM and other health sciences libraries also can develop special access tools to provide improved, relatively seamless electronic retrieval of relevant information that is distributed among many information services and to link published information with the data, news, testimony, information about experts and organizations, and the like that are critical to work in health policy and public health.

A second step toward improving health policy and public health information service is to educate more health science librarians to respond effectively to related information needs. Many librarians understand clinical and basic science information needs, information-seeking behavior, and information resources. Because their traditional user groups have not focused on health policy or public health issues, fewer librarians have similar expertise in these fields. NLM and NN/LM are working with the Medical Library Association and other relevant organizations to provide librarians with training that will help them to serve the health policy and public health communities.

#### **AN "INFORMATION CAPABLE" WORKFORCE**

Enhancing available information services will not achieve the desired result unless those engaged in health policy or public health work are able to use the

services. The ability to use information services effectively depends on access to appropriate computer equipment and the Internet, awareness of available services that contain useful information, a core level of competence in the use of information technology and relevant information services, and help from experts (e.g., librarians or other information specialists) when it is needed. NLM and NN/LM hope to address all these needs through outreach programs targeted toward health policy and public health workers.

#### PROGRESS TO DATE

In 1990, when Congress directed NLM to work with the newly formed Agency for Health Care Policy and Research to improve the dissemination of health services research and technology assessment information, the Library began special efforts to improve its collection and services related to health policy and some aspects of public health.\* NLM's definition of health services research includes many topics related to health policy and public health. A special Institute of Medicine study was commissioned to examine NLM's existing services and to recommend specific enhancements to its coverage of health services research and technology assessment.<sup>2</sup> In response to the study's recommendations, the library expanded its acquisitions of related technical reports; reorganized and expanded the coverage of related terminology in the medical subject headings (MeSH) thesaurus, which is used to index and catalog literature; and began development of new health services research databases. In 1993, NLM received congressional authorization and earmarked funding for a new National Information Center on Health Services Research and Health Care Technology (NICHSR). The center coordinates a wide-ranging NLM health services information program that includes enhancement of the library's collection and basic services, development of new databases and services, and research and development to promote computer-based patient record systems that are capable of generating research and public health data as a by-product of health care. Although significant progress has been made, more work is needed—and is under way—to improve the coverage of health policy and public health in NLM's collection, its on-line databases, and its thesaurus.

The establishment of NICHSR in 1993 also led to an expanded NLM and NN/LM outreach program designed to make the producers and users of health services research and technology assessment information aware of the new data-

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\*NLM has long-standing specialized information services in toxicology, environmental health, and acquired immunodeficiency syndrome, which are directly relevant to public health. For a description of these services, see the Special Information Programs section of NLM's home page at <http://www.nlm.nih.gov>.

bases and other relevant information services and to help them to use these tools. Targeted brochures and explanatory materials were produced, and staff from NLM and other NN/LM libraries began an expanded schedule of exhibits, presentations, and training classes at relevant professional meetings, including public health and prevention meetings. A lack of information technology and the cost of on-line services were obvious barriers for many working in public health, however.

The Library began to focus specifically on public health's lack of access to information technology in 1994, at the request of the Office of the Assistant Secretary for Health, Department of Health and Human Services.<sup>3</sup> In 1995, NLM, the Office of the Assistant Secretary, and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) cosponsored *Making a Powerful Connection: the Health of the Public and the National Information Infrastructure*, a meeting that brought together the public health, informatics, and health sciences library communities to develop strategies for ensuring that public health reaped the benefits of advances in information technology. The report resulting from this meeting recommended a number of steps, including the formation of "a strategic partnership between CDC, state and local public health associations, NLM, and the National Network of Libraries of Medicine to train state and local public health officials in the use of currently available information resources that are applicable to public health."<sup>4</sup>

Responding to this recommendation, NLM, CDC, NN/LM, the Association of State and Territorial Health Officials, and the National Association of County and City Health Officials launched a joint Partners in Information Access for Public Health Professionals initiative in 1997.\* NLM views its participation in this joint initiative as an important part of its health services research information and outreach programs. The partners have completed a number of preliminary steps, such as the development of links between the participants' Web sites; establishment of channels for informing public health professionals about NLM and NN/LM services, NLM informatics training programs, and funding for Internet connections; and a schedule of joint CDC/NLM/NN/LM exhibits and presentations at relevant meetings. Current priorities include additional NN/LM outreach projects to connect and train public health professionals in the use of NLM, CDC, and other relevant electronic information services, distance learning programs for public health professionals on the use of information technology and relevant information services, the development and evaluation

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\*Further information is available at the CDC Web site at <http://www.cdc.gov/phtn/piaphp.htm> or at the NLM site at <http://www.nlm.nih.gov/nno/partners.html>.

of Web-based tools designed to meet the information needs of specific segments of the public health workforce, and training for health sciences librarians in public health information needs and resources. Fortunately, the elimination of charges for Web-based access to NLM databases in mid-1997 removed one significant barrier to public health outreach efforts.

#### FUTURE DIRECTIONS

NLM views its cosponsorship and participation in the New York Academy of Medicine's forum, *Accessing Useful Information: Challenges in Health Policy and Public Health* and its follow-on strategy session as part of its overall health services research information program and the joint public health outreach initiative. The recommendations stemming from this meeting should provide valuable insights on how to improve information service to those working in health policy and public health and will help NLM and NN/LM to establish priorities and develop action plans for the next several years.

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