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Medical Libraries, Information Technology, and the African American Librarian

Today's information landscape is dynamic and full of promise and new directions. Search engines, global positioning systems, and social media have altered how people think about locating, accessing, storing and using information. Medical information, whether for the healthcare provider or consumer, inhabits a large portion of the digital landscape. Patients, along with their families and caregivers, struggle to find trusted sources for health news and trials. Health care practitioners stagger under the weight of trying to stay abreast of journal articles, systematic reviews, and clinical trial results. In addition, both sets of medical library patrons are retrieving medical information on handheld devices, such as smartphones, tablets or electronic readers. When I considered the topic of this chapter – challenges facing the African American medical librarian, I decided the focus should be on how African American librarians can become adept with the tools and formats of this new information environment.

Stereotypes have a way of restricting movement or progress, because the image or story is passed from person to person as “the way it is.” In a 1988 essay that appeared in *American Libraries*, Patrick A. Hall captured the conundrum stereotypes create: “most black librarians and other minority professionals are

trapped in the awkward position of trying to make people ‘comfortable’ with them as professionals while reserving enough energy to perform their jobs well” (p. 900). Librarians chafe at the image of an older, white woman with her finger pressed firmly to her lips to “shush” patrons. Similarly, if asked to describe an individual who is “tech savvy,” many people would describe a white male in his teens or 20s. The mainstream media perpetuate both stereotypes because the images provide a visual cue for an audience: people can readily grasp what the image represents when they see it. In an earlier, less virtually connected world, stereotypes were easier to maintain because no one could refute their veracity on a large scale. America in the 21st century, however, has an African American president. In addition there are scores of other African American leaders, such as Dr. E.J. Josey, founder of the Black Caucus of the American Library Association, who have demonstrated perseverance and accomplishment despite society’s limited expectations. Today’s African American medical librarians must push personal boundaries and dispel the stereotypes regarding prowess with technology. Today’s librarians are increasingly called on to use smartphones, mobile readers, and other handheld devices, as well as to be able to identify trends and reliable sources for mobile applications. Being on the margin of discussions about emerging trends in handheld and personal information technologies is a disservice, not only to us professionally, but also to our patrons, particularly those from ethnically and culturally diverse populations.

Medical librarians everywhere are encountering an unprecedented wave of digital resources. In addition, many content providers are developing mobile portals as more people own and utilize handheld devices. A report released in July

2010 by the Pew Internet & American Life Project stated that “minority Americans lead the way when it comes to mobile access—especially mobile access using handheld devices.” The report noted that in 2010, 87% of African Americans owned cell phones and that African American cell phone owners “*take advantage of a much wider array of their phones’ data functions*” (Smith, 2010, emphasis added). Specifically, the report noted that African American cell phone owners use non-voice functions such as text and instant messaging, e-mail, and access the Internet via their handheld device. One possible reason for this, the report noted, is that white cell phone users may also own a desktop or laptop computer to perform non-voice functions and, therefore, are not confined to using a sole device.

African American medical librarians must stay abreast of trends and developments in the digital information pipeline. This is not just for their own edification, but to continue to provide service to their patrons. The next generation of medical librarians and medical information consumers are digital natives—if they are using the applications and tools available on these devices, the African American medical librarian must be well-versed and adept with them, as well to provide a richer library experience and enhance his or her own career trajectory.

Two of this country’s premier national library organizations, the American Library Association (ALA) and the Medical Library Association, have groups that provide professional support and mentorship for African American librarians. The Black Caucus of the ALA and the African American Medical Librarians Association

are communities that gather in cyberspace and at face-to-face conferences to exchange ideas and consider future directions. One of these future directions might include focusing on enhancing and improving African American medical librarians' facility with existing and emerging technologies. Today's youth take these tools for granted since they are the "born digital" generation. Another librarian online community for networking and support that may be of interest is the Black Librarian Nation.

Two other organizations African American medical librarians may want to investigate are the National Society of Black Engineers and Black Data Processing Associates. It is not a stretch to see the potential for medical librarians to collaborate with information technology (IT) and engineering professionals and students to develop useful portals of health information for diverse populations. Librarians understand how information is gathered and organized; IT professionals and engineers know how information can be formatted and packaged for dissemination. Combining these strengths can bolster both professions and communities.

Our challenge, therefore, is to make the effort to become more visible and to speak with authority on the merging of IT, medical information, and library services. African American medical librarians must seek out opportunities for exploring and using these tools and assisting our patrons to be viewed as engaged and taken seriously by our colleagues. Just as important, we must write about these experiences for others to read and learn from. Most medical and hospital libraries are part of, or have a connection to, an academic campus. This

connection provides access to professional resources that can further careers and expand professional horizons. African American medical librarians must make our presence known by publishing in peer-reviewed journals that focus on special or medical libraries. Our research should include case studies of our progress in mastering multiple information technologies, creative ways to use these tools with medical content, and how we are sharing this knowledge with our patrons. These efforts often lead to invitations to present at conferences or workshops, where we can share our experiences and expertise with our professional peers. As we put ourselves in the public arena, we also become role models and mentors for African American students across all disciplines. Each of us knows how disheartening it is to not see ourselves well-represented in the intellectual community. African American medical librarians are in the unique position of being individuals who walk in multiple paths — information professionals, ethnically and culturally diverse, and increasingly adept with current and emerging technology. There is much to be shared from this abundance of experience.

References

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