Continuing Education for Medical Librarianship; A Symposium

Informal Study

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Our panel has been considering the ages of development of the medical librarian. It is obvious that the periods of university courses and internship, like youth, are short and intense, while refresher courses and informal study go on and on, like middle age, which biologists now tell us is the longest period of our lives. It is a time for broadening and ripening. A creature of habit and one who believes that sauce for the library clientele is sauce, also, for the librarian, I sought the library literature for ideas to refute or support my own suggestions. In the literature of a decade or so there was remarkably little written on informal study, by contrast with the spate of articles on formal education, in-service training, and institutes and workshops. Of a handful of tempting titles, I found three articles pertinent to my topic; two, I am proud to report, are editorials which appeared in our own Bulletin and the third article was written by a hospital librarian. I am loath to believe, however, that the apparent dearth of articles on continued self-education of librarians indicates that they do not continue to study and learn, though the situation did conjure up a mental picture of librarians standing like skiers at the top of a slope, fresh from basic training, who would forever after go only down hill unless some outside force pulled them up again. In fact I know that this is not true. Rather I believe that it is taken for granted that librarians, who are so closely associated with the voluntary continuing studies of their clientele, attend to continued study themselves. Or perhaps the lack of literature may be due to the fact that informal study is not always an isolated enterprise, a neatly bound topic, but a concomitant of many activities, and that considering it singly is like quoting a sentence out of context. These conclusions, however, are likely to make my remarks vague; therefore, I shall disregard them and try to be specific. I propose to review some possibilities for informal study. In the spirit of the topic assigned to me I shall not be didactic, I shall merely make suggestions.

To begin with that which is at hand, every one of us, beginning today at this meeting, is engaging in informal study. I hardly need enumerate the facets because all of us will be experiencing them, such as the planned programs with speakers experienced in their fields, the between-meeting opportunities to talk with colleagues, the visits to the libraries in this vicinity. From these experiences one never fails to take home some useful information, some lasting impressions—a new procedure, a note about a new gadget or a new use for an old one, some new book titles, or that confident feeling that anything they can do I can do better. Dr. Kronick and I have been thinking along the same lines, of course, my thoughts being somewhat more idealistic and sanguine.

The regional meetings, which are now country-wide and at frequent intervals, are additional opportunities for informal study. They may offer even better opportunities, because the groups are smaller and make possible more communication between the participants. Their programs can take cognizance of local conditions and problems.

While it is beneficial to attend meetings, participation in them is even better. To present a paper or to accept an invitation to sit on a panel or be one of a "working party" puts the whole meeting in sharper perspective. One has to think before he goes to the meeting, to have a keener mind-set for it, and his perception at the meeting is sharper. The preparation for one's part in the program has added benefits. The customary review of the literature provides not only grist for the mill but by-products—incidental intelligence—a variety of articles that one may have missed, fresh ideas, an overall picture of the literature. Of course, excursions along the by-paths double the time needed to prepare a paper, but they increase the fun, too. I am a case in point; today's assignment sent me to the library of a local library school. It was, and always is, a pleasurable experience; it is something I resolve to do periodically, but today's assignment made it necessary. There is another good thing about participation in a meeting or writing a paper: It requires one to clarify and crystallize his own thoughts. Informal study is not only book-learning; reflection gives it meaning and is certainly mental exercise.

The same processes and benefits apply, of course, to writing a paper for publication. For this one does not need to wait for a meeting; it can be done anytime and publication disperses one's ideas to a larger audience.

At the risk of incurring the displeasure of head librarians and personnel officers, I suggest to young librarians, commencing their careers with crisp diploma and perhaps the added polish of an internship, that during the first years of their experience they move about a bit from position to position or, in a large library, from department to department. This, also, is an opportunity for informal study. I am not confusing informal study with in-service training, of which a certain amount is necessary to becoming efficient in any new situation. Informal study occurs as one studies to apply to the new position
what one learned in the preceding one; it is carry-over. It is growth and the proof of the pudding.

Thus far, I have spoken of informal study in the field of librarianship. Now let us look at ourselves as subject specialists. I have no wish to debate the question whether special librarians should be subject specialists or should be able to organize special subject literature. One of the editorials in the Bulletin, of which I spoke, expressed, however, an opinion with which, from experience, I must agree, "that librarians must know enough of the subject matter to bring about the most effective organization of the knowledge entrusted to them."

(1) How can we do this?

First there is reading. And if you don't know what that is I have a new scientific definition clipped from the New York Times of May 8, 1960.† Miss Junior reminds us that librarians have an advantage over other people—they are surrounded by books. (2) The editorial I just mentioned, published in 1948, suggested that the librarian might well read some of the shorter textbooks such as those written for nurses. Since then there have been a great number of short review books written for doctors which can be equally useful to librarians, the "American Lecture Series" and "Modern Medicine Monographs," for instance. A subscription to Scientific American is to be recommended. It contains scientific articles written for laymen in pleasantly readable form by people who are knowledgeable, often expert, in their fields. And the subscription price is reasonable, too. Professional journals such as Medical Clinics of North America and the "Medical Progress" articles in New England Journal of Medicine are good. Because we are not practitioners of medicine but the organizers of its literature, such reviews give us the chance, in the words of one of my readers, "to know something about it, but not too much."

The following few suggestions may sound too work-a-day to be considered informal study, but the results are similar. If one is fortunate enough to have direct contact with the readers, each new reference question is an opportunity for informal study; one can casually amass considerable information while solving other people's problems. The cataloger really skims the cream; he gets the books first. And just scanning book reviews is another means of self-education. It is superficial, perhaps, but enlightening on recent progress and divergent opinions. Short cuts are not to be scorned these days when there is so much to know, witness the popularity of Current Contents in our libraries.

One can make a reading program for oneself, selecting a subject, making a

† Definition of reading presented by Dr. Jack A. Holmes, Professor of Educational Psychology at the California University School of Education, to the 1960 meeting of the International Reading Association, New York, N. Y.: "A processing skill of symbolic reasoning, sustained by the interfacilitation of an intricate hierarchy of substrata factors that have been mobilized as a psychological working system and pressed into service in accordance with the purpose of the reader."
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Syllabus or bibliography to be read through, during the winter months, for instance. Mr. Beatty’s section, “Winnowings,” in the BULLETIN is a good springboard to a reading program.

Planning and pursuing a solitary reading program takes a measure of self-discipline and it has a disadvantage in that there can be no sharing of ideas. So it is a good idea to take a college or university course now and then. This seems to border on “formal” education, but one can keep the “in” in informal if one chooses courses, not for credit, but for fun, just to learn something, taking, perhaps, a subject that never fit into the undergraduate curriculum, or pursuing a new interest, or getting a new slant on an old one. (2) The Russian language has probably sent people back to school more than any other subject in the last year or two.

Whatever the means of informal study, the important thing is that need, desire, for it be a component in one’s philosophy of life and librarianship, and that in practice provision be made for it. (Today’s Health, May 1960, has a practical article on “How You Can Save Time.”) It is possible to utilize odd bits of time or to recognize it as the by-product of an everyday activity, but it is better deliberately to set aside time for it and to free one’s mind of distractions for it. The one way is efficient; the other is more conscious and more satisfying. It is spiritually giving oneself a present. It is saying, “This is for me; this is to make me feel good.”

Now I have spent several minutes of your time speaking of things you know well and things you all do. I have stood before you, a vulnerable creature, because surely it has been possible to detect the places where I might have said “Do as I do,” or “Do as I say.” Each of us makes his own choice of form or subject, because informal study is an individual, a personal, matter. Opportunities for informal study surround us like the air. Utilizing them is, in the words of a familiar song title, “doing what comes naturally.”

REFERENCES