

Collaborative programs in the public library – a way to encourage access to health information

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Abstract:

The aim of this paper is to define another perspective on the position of health and library professionals in the changing information environment. The importance of their role to new models of collaboration in local community as a way to encourage access to health information in wide public is stressed. The case study will be the city and county library "Fran Galović" in Koprivnica, Croatia. Since 2008, when the library initiated the collaboration with health professionals in the local public hospital, the County Public Health Institute, the Health care house, non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and individuals, a lot of collaborative programs and projects for children and adults have been realizing on regular basis. Their aim is to inform, educate and raise awareness of all age population on the topics of health. Collaborative programs have different formats, taking place in the library, inside and outside of its building in order to promote the health prevention issues, the healthy style of life, as well as library collections and information sources on health topics.

The health professionals have realized that their engagement in health prevention and promotion outside of their working places contribute to a better informed wider public on health prevention, as well as flow of health information. Librarians have realized that cooperation with health professionals, NGOs and individuals contribute to better visibility of library health collections and access to health information to the wider public. According to the research results, the Koprivnica public library with its collaborative health programs has been recognized as an important factor in the development of the local community. In the lack of consistent models of collaboration in spreading health information in local communities, it serves as a role model to other public libraries in Croatia and internationally.

Keywords: public access to health information, collaborative health programs, librarians, health professionals, Public library “Fran Galović” in Koprivnica - Croatia

Introduction

Health information is a part of everyday services, not only of hospital and health care libraries facilities [1], but also of many public and school libraries all over the world.

According to their mission in contemporary society, especially public libraries have undertaken responsibility to enable free access to health information for wide public as education, information, cultural and communication centers of their communities [2]. They increasingly help citizens in finding health information with their multimedia collections and librarians as information professionals. In many countries providing health information in public libraries is the trend, with librarians employed specifically to provide health information. Also health kiosks with different kinds of materials are run in collaboration with health organizations and institutions. There are national programs in health prevention and education from an early age taking places just in public libraries [3].

The public library "Fran Galović" in Koprivnica, Croatia, has a long tradition in providing health information in the community. It is a city and county, medium-sized library with 23 employees, serving the population of the city of Koprivnica (32,000 inhabitants) and the Koprivnica-Krizevci County (122,000 inhabitants) [4].

Having its focus promotion of reading and literacy skills of all ages citizens in local community, the Koprivnica public library found inspiration to start providing health information in a different way during the UNESCOs campaign in 2007 and 2008, which was celebrated the 8 September, International Literacy Day under the mottos *Literacy, key to health and well-being* [5] and *Literacy is the best remedy* [6]. Namely, on the International Literacy Day each year, UNESCO reminds the international community on the status of literacy and adult learning globally. The theme on literacy and health was emphasized in the 2007-2008 biennium of the United Nations Literacy Decade. A special focus was given to the vital relationship between literacy and health in response to broad social, economic and technological changes in contemporary societies. Health literacy was stressed as an integral aspect of the universal right to education, and as an essential basis for improving health conditions. Under the UNESCO's campaign, the Koprivnica public library, similar to other libraries in Croatia and all over the world, took part in advocating an integrated approach, which stressed that along with the health system, the education and literacy also played a key role in disease prevention. Promoting an importance of *health literacy*, the public library of Koprivnica was recognized in local community as partner in the project *Health county, health city*. The project was running all over Croatia under the umbrella of international and national health organizations network with an aim to inform, educate, raise awareness, prevent and motivate citizens to take care not only of their personal health, but to accept active engagement in healthcare of society in general. That event was just the beginning of creating numerous health project and programs in collaboration with the local public hospital, the County public health institute, the Health Care House and non-governmental organizations in health care and prevention.

Collaborative projects and programs on health issues in the Koprivnica public library

The collaborative programs on health issues in the Koprivnica public library have different formats (exhibitions of library collections, lectures for adults, workshops for children and adults - separate and together, storytelling hours for babies, toddlers and preschool children, online questionnaire, etc.). They take place in the library, inside and outside of its building, as well as in virtual space. The aim is to inform, educate, promote and raise awareness of all age population to the importance of health care issues, healthy style of life, as well as on library collections and information sources on health topics. The program and its sub-programs are branded by special logo and name *Health information* [7].

Prevention of visual impairments

Since 2006, when the service for the blind and visually impaired was implemented in the Koprivnica public library as a pilot in Croatia, the library has been running projects on prevention of various visual impairments in cooperation with the ophthalmological department of the local public hospital. In the library an info-point has been set up with leaflets under the title *Ophthalmologist informs you*. The aim is to warn on prevention of cataracts and glaucoma, that diabetes can be a cause of blindness, sight care of the child, etc. [8].

As part of the Library Open Days, librarians welcomed interested customers of all age in checking vision, including parents with children from four years onwards. The vision checking was run by an ophthalmologist, who applied a very simple method of using a mirror and recognition of "hooks". After that, results were analyzed in the ophthalmological ambulance. It should be mentioned that three cases of glaucoma (elevated intraocular pressure disease which leads to blindness) were detected in such way [9].

The World Glaucoma Week has been also marked in the library in cooperation with local ophthalmologists, attracting a wide public and promoting an importance of regular intraocular pressure checking.

Health tips under library parasols

The Koprivnica public library has initiated another form of non-formal health education of citizens in collaboration with health care institutions - the Koprivnica Public hospital, the County institute of public health and the Health care house. Since 2008, during summer months, the program *Health tips under library parasols* have been gathering citizens with doctors and nurses under parasols on the terrace in front of the library building. The advantage of library location in the main city square within pedestrian area is used to attract wider public for the healthcare issues. The aim is to familiarize citizens with information on health issues and patients' rights, and sensitize them to the need to change attitudes towards their own role in health protection. The message of such program is that health care should be an everyday habit, not just when we are sick. The library mediates these direct contacts with health professionals and citizens in the place quite different from health care institutions and health professionals' working places, where they rarely find time for prevention and health education.

The various, by health professionals and citizens suggested titles of topics of such non-formal health consultations, which were held once a week during summer months, July and August, in the 2008-2010 and 2013-2015 periods were [10]:

- tick-borne transmitted diseases in the Koprivnica-Križevci county, sexually transmitted diseases, the law on the protection of patients' rights, healthy nutrition, diabetes in everyday life, how to recognize pain, cancer prevention, addictions in daily lives (2008);
- by animals transmitted infections, breast tumors - early discovering and treatments, how to be cool without alcohol addiction, how to be healthier with less salt intake, skin changes caused by the sun, the five steps to non-smoking (2009);

- emotional intelligence, colorectal cancer - where and how to test yourself, stroke - how to recognize and prevent it, how to properly maintain hand hygiene, body movements and exercising at every age (2010);
- cervical cancer prevention and treatment, importance of water on health, abusing and neglecting of children - how to recognize and respond, first aid at home, emergency medicine, healthy aging, colorectal cancer (2013);
- osteoporosis, healthy sleeping, nutrition, diseases of the nervous system, cardiovascular diseases, thyroid gland, respiratory diseases (2014);
- dementia, rheumatic diseases, a healthy diet for children and adults, mental health - a source of strength and security for the individual and the family, recreation - small steps to a better quality of life, how to protect skin from the sun, positive psychology - *think positive* (2015).

In the 2008-2010 and 2013-2015 periods, 57 sessions of health tips under library parasol with 1,428 visitors were held in cooperation with the health professionals from various fields of medicine and related fields - nurses, ophthalmologist, otolaryngologist, infectious disease specialist, neurologists, nutritionists, pharmacists, specialists in medical biochemistry and laboratory medicine, physical therapists, specialists in physical medicine and rehabilitation, dermatologists, internists, microbiologists, epidemiologist, psychologist, psychiatrist, etc.

Supplements to these programs have been:

- measurement of blood pressure, body mass index and blood sugar done by nurses
- demonstration of recreation exercises, as well as massage done by the students attending local medicine middle school
- information given by librarians on library materials for specific health topics presented on sessions.

The survey have shown that the program *Health tips under library parasols* is very popular among participants, because of better access to health information in such a different way – in relaxed atmosphere and attractive environment, as well as in direct contacts between citizens and healthcare professionals outside of their working places in healthcare institutions. It was also shown that women participate more than men in such program of non-formal education. Majority of them are middle age persons (40-65 years old). By fulfilling the survey forms they have opportunity not only to evaluate each session, but to suggest health topics they are interested in.

Cooperation with non-governmental organizations and individuals

In the cooperation with the County League against cancer, the library gives its premises for exhibitions, workshops and lectures for spreading information and raise awareness on prevention of malignancies, as well as the need to support the patients.

The library also cooperates with the Association "Hepatos" of persons with hepatitis, the Association "For a new day" of persons suffering from malignant diseases and members of their families, the Foundation of severely ill persons in the Koprivnica-Križevci county, established by the local food company to provide financial assistance and psychological support, as well as with the Croatian medical association - Branch Koprivnica.

Besides, the library cooperates with associations and individuals dealing with alternative approaches to health. Some of the processed topics in previous years were: importance of herbs in the health, bioenergy against stress, the impact of tai chi on our health, the advantage of the Chinese medicine, the art of living, the music therapy, etc.

The latest, this year started a program under title "Books lead to the health" combines the librarians' presentation of library sources on health information with workshops for wide public led by a psychologist and a psychiatrics on various psychological topics, for example on stress, depression, self-confidence, positive thinking, etc.

Protection of patients' rights

In 2011, the Public library of Koprivnica initiated the campaign entitled "How we, as patients, are aware of our rights and duties". Namely, practice has shown that many of patients do not know their rights ensured in Croatia by the new Law on the Protection of Patients' Right, such as rights to medical information, confidentiality, privacy of own personality, asking the opinion of another doctor, etc. The importance of knowledge of patient's obligations has also been stressed in campaign, for example obligation to follow the doctor's instructions in prevention or treatment of diseases, adhere to the house rules at the hospital, the instructions on no smoking, etc.

The library created an online questionnaire on the perception of citizens about their rights and obligations as being patients [11]. The questionnaire was available on the Internet, but for all of those who did not have access to it and did not know how to use it, the librarians offered a help in fulfilling the questionnaire. The answers obtained from 63 responders showed that they were partially informed about their rights and responsibilities as patients, but only 12% of them knew and even 88% did not know whom to contact in the case that their rights as patients would not be respected.

Results of research were presented as an introduction to the forum entitled "How to realize the rights of patients" and participated by the health professionals, librarians and citizens [9]. The forum hosted a lawyer, one of the leading Croatian experts in the field of medical law and damages of medical errors, known as a frequent guest of TV shows dealing with the protection of patients' rights. The issues on the forum panel were: the right to health-care objections and complaints, informed consent, the right to refuse the proposed treatments, the right for a second opinion, and the right for compensation in the case of medical errors. The goals were to improve citizens' health literacy, i.e. overall awareness of their rights and responsibilities as patients, and to improve communication between citizens and health professionals in the field of patients' rights.

The library plan is to repeat an online questionnaire in order to check possible progress in the perception of citizens about their rights and obligations as being patients, as well as to organize forums on this issue for professionals and citizens. The aim will be to attract attention of wider public again to the importance of respect the patients' rights in order to offer better health service to citizens.

Collaborative programs and projects for children

Several collaborative health programs take place in the library with aim to spread awareness of healthcare issues among children and their parents.

Take care about your eyesight from an early age is the program devoted to pre-school and school children to spread awareness to the needs of their blind and visually impaired peers. It has been organized in cooperation with the county association for the blind and children's ophthalmologists. The aim is promoting tolerance towards differences telling the stories about a white cane (a walking tool of the blind), the Braille or dotted letter, etiquette in communication with the blind and visually impaired peers, etc.

Storytelling hours for babies and toddlers up to 3 years and their parents are organized once a month in the library in cooperation with kindergarten teachers. Tips important to child healthcare in their growing up are often covered. In the 2008-2015 period some of the themes related to the health of children were: the importance of a healthy feeding from the earliest age, hygienic habits of the youngest, teeth hygiene from an early age, importance of recreation and sport in children's growing up, how to suppress the fear of going to the doctor, vitamins in the diet of children, etc.

There were 51 sessions held on health topics from the period 2008 to 2015 with 1,173 visitors, both babies and their parents. Evaluation survey has shown high satisfaction of parents, as well as their suggestions of health topics for future meetings [12].

Storytelling hours for 4-6 years old preschoolers, also in cooperation with kindergartens teachers, are very often connected with reading picture books on the health themes. Some of such topics are: how to take care about your health, allergies in the spring, a story about boys and bikes, etc.

Citizens' perception of importance of collaborative health programs in local community

The survey undertaken as part of the Ph.D. thesis entitled "Public library as a local community centre in the contemporary society" [13] gave an overview of the perception of the citizens of Koprivnica on the roles and tasks of the library in society. The survey data collection was conducted on a sample with controlled quotas, using two separate independent samples, each with 150 examinees, one of 150 registered library members, and the other of 150 library non-members. Their attitudes regarding the social impact of library's services (existing and potential) have shown that the Koprivnica public library with its collaborative health programs has been recognized as an important factor in development of the local community. The participatory health prevention and education programs were ranked by the examinees as "extremely important" in the development of the community. Among 16 offered library services and programs, the examinees rated the Health information programs on the sixth place after the service for the blind and visually impaired, free lending of books, free reading periodicals and free access to computers and internet.

There were no statistically significant differences between library members and non-members in the perception of the importance of access to health information via participatory programs and projects in the development of local community.

Conclusions

The public library “Fran Galović” in Koprivnica has initiated networking of responsible members in health prevention and introducing new models of collaboration in local community as a way to encourage access to health information in wide public. Healthcare professionals outside of their working places recognize the opportunity to encourage citizens to prevent diseases and live in a healthier way. Librarians promote library resources on healthcare issues in more visible and effective way. Citizens have an opportunity to be better informed and more encouraged to take care of their personal health and welfare of society.

This case study of the Public library in Koprivnica has shown another perspective on the position of health and library professionals in the changing information environment. In the lack of consistent models of collaboration in spreading health information in local communities, it serves as a role model to other public libraries in Croatia and internationally.

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