

ORIGINAL RESEARCH

# Health Libraries and Information Services in Tanzania: A Strategic Assessment



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## Abstract

**BACKGROUND** The intention of the Government of Tanzania is to establish more health information resource centers in all health facilities. With this regard, health information science personnel are needed to provide adequate and accurate health information services. However, availability of these personnel remains to be a challenge because of their non-existence.

**OBJECTIVE** To identify the current status and local impact of health sciences libraries and user perception of these libraries, as a prerequisite to the development of a competence-based curriculum for health information science training in Tanzania.

**METHODS** A needs assessment was carried out using a convenience sample of local respondents, including librarians, trainers, academicians, students, health care providers, and patients and families, drawn from national, referral, regional, district hospitals, health training institutions, and universities from both government and nongovernment entities in Tanzania. A focus group approach was used to gather data from respondents.

**RESULTS** Results from this assessment revealed that health science libraries in Tanzania are faced with the challenges of insufficient infrastructure, old technology, limited facilities and furniture, inadequate and incompetent library staff, lack of health sciences librarians, outdated and insufficient resources, and low knowledge and use of information technologies by library clients. Most respondents would prefer to have both physical and electronic libraries, as well as librarians with specialized health information science skills, to cope with changing nature of the medical field.

**CONCLUSIONS** The findings obtained from this assessment are strong enough to guide the development of a curriculum and training strategy and an operational plan and training packages for health information professionals. The development of a training curriculum for health information science professionals will mean better health information service delivery for Tanzania.

**KEY WORDS** health information, health information needs, health information specialist, health sciences libraries, Tanzania

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The authors report nothing to declare in this article.

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## INTRODUCTION

The nation of Tanzania has begun implementing health sector reforms to improve equitable access to health information and to improve the quality of information received by all user communities. At the moment, the need for timely and quality-filtered information in health care is universal. The overwhelming amount of health information, and the absence of time and expertise on the part of physicians and other health professionals to find, assess, and apply health information in their daily decision making, have created an opportunity for information science specialists to play a major role in (1) storage, (2) retrieval, (3) appraisal, (4) management, (5) summarization, and (6) delivery of timely and reliable health information at the point of health settings.<sup>1,2</sup> Although there are some relatively recent studies of information needs and behaviors of health-related users in other countries in sub-Saharan Africa,<sup>3–11</sup> there are few specific studies on health information practices in Tanzania.<sup>12–14</sup>

An understanding of the training needs for medical librarians will help the Tanzanian Ministry of Health and Social Welfare (MoHSW) improve the operations of ministry-sponsored, faith-based organizations and private health science libraries, as well as those in clinical and educational units across the nation. Information specialists need to become more effective and efficient in the provision of health information services to their users, by acquiring the relevant information necessary to the health professionals and providing that information in a cost-effective and efficient manner that will enhance the provision of high-quality health services in Tanzania.

The MoHSW conducted a needs assessment project aimed at identifying the current situation of the medical and health libraries in the country and assessing the health information training requirements for librarians. The project was required to initiate a national health information science program at health training institutions to produce health information specialists who would then be in all clinical areas, hospitals, health higher learning institutions, and nursing and allied health sciences schools for both public, faith-based organizations and private entities in the country. The needs assessment project was expected to guide subsequent activities, such as the development of a budget for ongoing training and operational planning, competencies and curriculum development, and possible continuing education training modules for medical librarians at diploma, bachelors, and

masters achievement levels. A follow-up meeting was held with a video conference between participants in Tanzania and colleagues who were gathered at the National Library of Medicine in the United States.

**Related Work.** *Current competencies of practicing librarians in health sciences libraries in Tanzania.* “The health sciences librarian believes that knowledge is the sine qua non of informed decisions in health care and the health sciences librarian serves society, clients, and the institution, by working to ensure that informed decisions can be made.”<sup>15</sup> It has been noted that access to accurate and appropriate information is a prerequisite to good health.<sup>16</sup> Ultimately, services provided by health sciences librarians at many health organizations require them to act as full members of the health workforce.<sup>17,18</sup> Unfortunately, the health science information systems and services in Tanzania are not well organized to provide an opportunity for health librarians work in close collaboration with clinicians. The existing health information centers include university libraries serving medical and allied health faculties and students, health training institution libraries operated by the MoHSW, a central MoHSW medical library, and national, referral, regional, and district hospital libraries and libraries in some public and private health-related organizations. Many hospitals and health facilities do not have health sciences libraries or health information resource centers, and most of the librarians in Tanzania do not possess appropriate knowledge and skills to provide quality health information services in a timely and accurate manner.<sup>12,14,19</sup>

As a specialized field, education for medical librarianship needs special courses and lectures; medicine has its own subject classification systems, different from those used by librarians in nonmedical information. Tanzania is among the developing countries with no academic library science programs for medical librarianship. Some colleges and universities in Tanzania do offer library, information management, and information science courses at general levels; these diploma/degree/masters programs cover general library and information science concepts and competencies, and graduates are prepared primarily for work in the academic and public library sectors. Thus, a specialized curriculum in medical librarianship is needed to prepare information professionals who can deliver health information services that will make a difference in health care services and clinical research. A thorough investigation of contemporary medical information needs in Tanzania is necessary to inform medical librarian curriculum

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