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Platform for Change: Medical Library Education in the Information Age: Introduction

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SYMPOSIUM

Platform for Change: medical library education in the information age

Compiled and edited by Fred W. Roper and M. Kent Mayfield

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INTRODUCTION

"The education of professionals to manage the nation's biomedical information resources is of widespread concern" [1]. That statement introduced a 1986 special report on education for health sciences librarianship in the *Bulletin of the Medical Library Association*. Papers in that report identified critical issues facing educators and practitioners and explored the future from the vantage of professional education. The authors called upon librarians to keep pace with enormous changes in the medical and information environments and identified the need for cross-disciplinary cooperation among health sciences librarianship, medical informatics, and the health professions, as well as cooperation between practicing information professionals and educators. They did not, however, provide direct assistance in dealing with the emerging array of knowledge and skills needed for health sciences librarianship nor did they challenge the predominant models for professional education.

The present symposium goes further. While the authors revisit some of the same issues, they also explore new terrain, prompted in their effort by the publication of *Platform for Change: The Educational Policy Statement of the Medical Library Association*.

The health sciences information environment remains complex. Exponential growth in biomedical knowledge and new information technologies is redefining the infrastructure of health care, education, and research. There is little doubt that this presages significant change in the roles of health information professionals and in the knowledge and skills required of them. Each of the contributors finds reason to fear that librarians may be blindsided unless they understand the new environment's impact on the profession.

In the opening article, Roper and Mayfield summarize the findings of a major research study undertaken by MLA's Knowledge and Skills Task Force. The study undergirds the recommendations presented in *Platform for Change* and challenges the profession to reconsider and reshape the preparation of new information professionals and continuing education of seasoned medical librarians.

In the papers that follow, authors well acquainted with the health sciences, library management, and education consider the roles and responsibilities of health information professionals in a rapidly changing, knowledge-based society characterized by technological sophistication, new communication patterns, and altered working relationships.

Braude moves quickly to his central theme: unless there is significant change in the education of health sciences librarians, the future managers of health information will hold primary membership in another

profession. He cites a variety of impediments to librarians' maintaining a competitive edge and challenges librarians to look beyond traditional skills and environments for learning. For Jones, however, an integrated information environment, such as that fostered by the Joint Commission on Accreditation of Healthcare Organizations, presents a challenge to medical librarians and gives them increased opportunity to exploit their unique ability to solve information problems.

While Creth acknowledges the dual forces of a powerful, expanding information base and rapidly changing communication technologies along with restricted economic conditions, her focus is on finding ways for libraries to acquire new priorities that make them dynamic and responsive in the face of change. From Creth's vantage, the user is pivotal in any reshaping of the library for leadership in the future, and "leadership" itself takes on a new meaning.

All the authors agree that the health care environment is changing. Roles of information professionals are shifting to involve not only information processing but also biomedical subject knowledge, consumer service, and education. New technologies are altering the workplace and the competencies required for professional practice. In the concluding article of the symposium, Mayfield suggests that this change creates a new relationship between the limited reality of the classroom and the larger reality of professional life. What once seemed necessary and sufficient in graduate and continuing education is now out of step with the times and no longer matches the character of the environment with its complexity, uncertainty, instability, uniqueness, and value-added dimensions. New models for professional learning are needed.

Each paper is clear in its focus on professional practice, exploring implications for the relationship with clients and users, for the technological and organizational setting of library services, and for the place of the information professional in society. Each profiles the need to define education for health information professionals more broadly than an individual instructor, agency or institution might. Taken together, they endorse a collaborative approach to education that anticipates the information needs of the future, accelerates mastery of new technologies, and enhances the natural connection between study and professional practice. In this, they build on the premises of *Platform for Change* and move toward that "new consensus within the health professional community on the knowledge and skills required to meet the needs—present and future—of health care, research, and education in technologically intensive, user-driven, and rapidly changing organizations" [2].

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