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# Research Support Librarian at Imperial College London: the first year



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## IDENTIFYING NEEDS

Imperial College London's medical library service provides a range of services to Faculty of Medicine staff, students and researchers as well as to the staff of several affiliated NHS trusts with which we have a service level agreement in place. In recent years we have received an increasing number of requests from researchers for direct assistance in the literature searching elements of systematic reviews. For those who are not aware of what systematic reviews are here is a summary:

A systematic review attempts to collate all empirical evidence that fits pre-specified eligibility criteria in order to answer a specific research question. It uses explicit, systematic methods that are selected with a view to minimize bias, thus providing more reliable findings from which conclusions can be drawn and decisions made.<sup>1</sup>

The literature search is an integral part of a systematic review as it is the main source of the evidence used to answer the research question. We noticed that although some researchers needed our support to carry out the literature searching themselves, many wished to outsource the literature searching elements of the systematic review process and they recognised our expertise in this area. At this stage we realised that we needed to respond to this opportunity to extend our services and did not have the capacity within the current team to support research directly in this way, so the post of Research Support Librarian (Medicine) was therefore created. Tim Reeves was appointed to the post in November 2010 and reflects on the

challenges of getting established in a new post with a new remit.

## **DEFINING THE ROLE**

The main focus of the new post is to provide librarian-mediated literature searches for use in systematic reviews and other research. This service is available to Faculty of Medicine staff and students as well as staff of NHS trusts affiliated with Imperial College London. To give an idea of the work that we are supporting, here are some examples of searches I have conducted: 'Telehealth for diabetes mellitus' for an Imperial College Research Associate from the Department of Primary Care and Public Health; 'Systematic review of patient safety in primary care' by an Honorary Clinical Research Fellow at Imperial College; and 'Necrotizing enterocolitis in term new born infants' for a Neonatal Unit who were updating ward guidelines. In each case I meet face to face with the user in order better to understand their research, establish specifics about the search criteria and agree deadlines. I then create and carry out the searches on relevant databases, de-duplicate the results using reference management software and send the resulting citations to the user in electronic format. I tend not to meet the user face to face again, although regular contact is maintained via email.

The role has also developed to cover other areas where a need has become apparent, such as support in data management, providing training and support in critical appraisal, and assisting in journal clubs, groups that meet regularly to critically evaluate recently published articles.

## **THE FIRST YEAR**

As the post was newly created, the first year involved a lot of work. On a personal level I have tried to further develop my existing search skills and knowledge of medical resources so that they are at the necessary level for systematic reviews; I have done so by attending a number of courses, such as those run by the Centre for Reviews and Dissemination.

Initially much of the work came from referrals from other medicine library team staff. The disadvantage of this is that it often involved users who only approached the library when they reached an impasse in their own attempts at searching and this was likely to be close to a deadline. To try to overcome this problem and become involved at an earlier stage in the process I undertook a large amount of advocacy to raise the profile of the

service. Advocacy, however, was complex due to the nature of the target audience: researchers often worked on their projects alone or in small groups; they are spread across five hospital-based campuses distributed across West London and the main central library at South Kensington; and they could be linked to Imperial College or the NHS.

One form that the advocacy took was targeted advertisements, but it took time to identify suitable vehicles for promotion that would reach the specific users who were likely to use the service. Advertisements were created and circulated via a variety of resources and communications, including postgraduate email bulletins, newsletters for NHS researchers in particular fields and emails sent to relevant new college members. There were two kinds of advertisement: longer pieces with a photo of myself that were more personal in tone for newsletters and magazines; or brief bullet points mentioning core services and our web page address for emails.

Another aspect of the advocacy involved adding web pages to the library website, highlighting the literature searching service. I was also keen to add useful resources to the web pages and developed an online request form for a literature search; this has sped up the processing of requests. A web page specially dedicated to literature searching for systematic reviews was also added; it combined information covering the systematic review process with links to a variety of resources covering systematic reviews, clinical trials, search filters and grey literature. Locating these resources and information in one place for users has proved useful. The visibility of the service was aided by another library initiative that added a prominent area specifically for researchers on the library website; this included links to the web pages covering literature searching.

Perhaps some of the best advocacy, however, was carried out by those who had used the service and mentioned us to colleagues within their field or departments. As might be expected, this advocacy has only a gradual effect and there is likely to be a time lag, but it is important none the less.

Another important aspect of the first year has involved establishing closer links with non-library bodies that work with researchers in the college or affiliated NHS trusts. For example, an advocacy and referral agreement has been established with the Statistical Advisory Service that carries out statistical work for members of the college.

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### Medicine research support

The Library can assist Faculty of Medicine and NHS users in their research.

This service is available to Imperial College London staff or students belonging to the Faculty of Medicine as well as to staff of NHS Trusts covered by the Service Level Agreement between Imperial College London Library and NHS London. [Is my NHS trust covered?](#)

Services available include:

- Undertaking literature searches for systematic reviews and other research
- Assisting in the literature search element of a research bid
- Assistance in citation management
- Training on literature searching methodology
- Training in critical appraisal

Please contact the [Research Support Librarian \(Medicine\)](#) if you have any queries regarding your research needs.



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**Contacts and help**

- Contact Tim Reeves  
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Print Email to a Friend Report incorrect content

Fig.1 Medicine research support web page

<http://www3.imperial.ac.uk/library/subjectsandsupport/medicine/researchsupport>

#### WORKING WITH RESEARCHERS

The job has created some challenges and has led me to develop particular skills for working with researchers. One such was the switch to actually doing work on behalf of readers, rather than demonstrating resources or skills to library users so that they can use or apply them themselves. The knock-on effect is that I have had to be more adaptable to users' needs and have had to liaise closely with them, whilst at the same time being clear about what services are available and what work I will undertake. I would say that my negotiating and influencing skills have certainly developed since I started in the post. Another challenge has been getting information from users in order to understand enough about their research to get the work completed successfully. Users are often so immersed in their research that it may be hard for someone else less involved to make sense of it. It took me a little while to develop my 'information extraction skills' but I have found that more often than not users are happy to provide me with a plain language summary of their research; this is often something they have to do anyway at the writing-up stage.

#### CONCLUSION

Given that the post has only existed for short while and that research is a complex field, it is hard to measure exactly how successfully the remit has been carried out. However, one indicator is that we have had a number of acknowledgements in published papers. Another is that there seems to be an increasing amount of work coming in; this is encouraging, especially as the possibilities for advocacy have not been exhausted. It is also encouraging that individuals for whom I have worked have recommended me to others in their field or departments. In conclusion, I would say that although the first year has been busy and there have been some difficulties, getting established in this new post was reasonably straightforward as the need existed for a literature searching service, and we were able to provide it. The next step involves finding other concrete ways that we can assist our users in their research.

#### NOTE

- 1 Higgins, J.P. and Green, S. (eds). 2008. *Cochrane handbook for systematic reviews of interventions*. Cochrane Book series. John Wiley & Sons Ltd: Chichester