More Questions Than Answers: 8 lessons from my first year as a health librarian

Tyarna Brookes
Librarian, Grampians Health
https://orcid.org/0009-0001-7414-802X

If someone had asked me twelve months ago what a health librarian actually did all day, I probably would have given a fairly confident answer. I would also have been very wrong.

After a year, and a bit, because apparently reflective writing requires both reflection and spare time, I have learned that the role involves a little bit of everything: detective work, teaching, troubleshooting IT issues, project management, marketing, and outreach. Somewhere in between all of that, I also answer article requests and find time to do some shelving.

While I was not new to healthcare when I started at Grampians Health Library, I was new to Health Librarianship. The hospital environment and the pace of healthcare were already familiar, but the breadth of the profession was not. Before starting in the role, I don't think I could have accurately described everything a Health Librarian does. I am not sure many people outside the profession could either.

A little over twelve months later, I still have far more to learn than I know. Looking back, however, several lessons and surprises stand out. Together, they have given me a much greater appreciation for this varied, people-focused, and rewarding profession.

Lesson 1: I Thought I Knew How to Search
When I started as a Health Librarian, I thought I knew how to search. I knew my way around a database and felt confident finding information. I soon discovered, however, that searching is much easier when the person asking the question knows exactly what they want. They often do not.

Part of the job is translating a broad, unclear, or highly specific request into something a database can understand. That means considering subject headings, keywords, alternative terminology, and the many ways someone might describe the same concept. The first search may retrieve twelve results or twelve thousand, but neither number matters much if the results are not useful. Databases, unfortunately, are very good at answering the question you searched rather than the question you meant to search. Searching effectively requires more than technical knowledge. It

also involves curiosity, persistence, judgement, and a willingness to try a different approach when the first, second, or sometimes fifth attempt does not quite work.

Taking responsibility for the monthly Evidence Update produced for the Grampians Health Board has given me a valuable opportunity to develop these skills. Searching for an Executive audience is not the same as searching for a nurse looking for evidence to inform clinical practice, a researcher developing a project, or a student completing an assignment. Each audience has different priorities, levels of subject knowledge, and time available to engage with the information. Producing the Evidence Update has helped me refine my searches, think more creatively about where useful evidence might be found, and become more selective about what I include.

I still have a great deal to learn about searching, but I no longer think of a successful search as simply finding information. Looking for information is only half the job. Understanding what will be useful to a particular audience and presenting it in a way they can readily use it is where the real challenge begins.

Learning to search at this level has been challenging, but I have had the considerable advantage of learning from three experienced Librarians, each with their own strengths and an apparently endless supply of knowledge.

Lesson 2: Every Librarian Has a Superpower

One of the greatest advantages of beginning my career as part of an experienced Library team has been having a front row seat to their expertise. I work alongside three Librarians who each bring different strengths, knowledge, and experience to their roles.

I have learned an enormous amount simply by observing how they approach questions, solve problems and work with staff. There have been many moments when one of them has found an answer before I have finished explaining the problem. At other times, they have remembered a resource, contact, process or tiny detail that I would not have known where to begin looking for.

A little over a year later, I am still mystified by the things my colleagues seem to “just know”. I am increasingly convinced that Librarians accumulate knowledge the way dragons accumulate treasure. The difference is that Librarians are usually much more willing to share it.

What I have come to appreciate is that their knowledge has not appeared overnight. It has been built through years of answering questions, navigating systems, developing relationships, and solving problems without obvious answers. Working alongside them has also shown me that there is no single way to be a good Health

Librarian. One may know how to approach a difficult search, another may understand the history of a service, and another may notice the practical detail everyone else has overlooked. Their strengths are complementary, and I have been fortunate to learn from all three.

I am still developing my own strengths and discovering what my Librarian superpower might be. For now, I am grateful to work with colleagues who answer my questions, share their knowledge and regularly demonstrate just how much experience sits behind the work of a Health Library.

Lesson 3: Becoming a Professional Detective

Not every article request arrives with a complete citation. Sometimes I receive the title, author, journal and publication year. Other times, I receive an email that says, "Can you get me this article?" accompanied by half a title and no other details. The follow-up conversation usually looks something like this:

"Do you know the full title?"
"Not really."
"The author?"
"No."
"The journal?"
"No."
"Do you remember anything else about it?"
"Someone mentioned it in a meeting."

Health Librarianship has convinced me that Librarians and detectives share many of the same professional skills. Both require persistence, attention to detail, creative thinking, and the ability to make something useful out of a very small number of clues. Finding a hard to locate article can feel like completing a puzzle where half the pieces are missing and nobody remembers what the final picture looked like. Tracking down these resources can involve testing different versions of a title, searching fragments of a phrase, following citation trails, and making educated guesses about what the requester heard or remembered. Sometimes the article appears quickly. At other times, one vague request leads through several databases, Google Scholar, and an email to another Librarian before the right item finally appears.

Once the article has been identified, there is still the challenge of obtaining it. It may be available through the Library's subscriptions, freely accessible online, or obtainable through document delivery. Much of this work happens behind the scenes, so the eventual email containing the requested article can make the process look much simpler than it was.

There is a particular satisfaction in finding an article from only a few scattered clues. It is a small victory, but one that reminds me how much of Library work involves patience, problem solving, and knowing where to look next. It turns out that "someone mentioned it in a meeting" is not a complete citation, but it is sometimes enough to begin the investigation.

Lesson 4: The Library Is Wherever People Are

If there was one genuine "sink or swim" project during my first year, it was establishing a regular Library service at the Stawell campus of Grampians Health. Working across a regional and rural health service creates opportunities to visit different campuses, meet staff working in different areas of healthcare, and take Library services directly to the people who need them. It also requires a fair amount of planning.

Setting up regular Library services involved organising the logistics, speaking to staff, sniffing out all the different buildings staff work in, and then scheduling regular visits. I also needed to book the Library space for my Stawell days, promote the service, and deliver introductory presentations explaining who I was, and what the Library could offer.

Taking responsibility for the service pushed me well outside my comfort zone. It required me to introduce myself to new people, advocate for the Library, and work through problems as I went. There were certainly moments when I felt like I was learning to swim after already jumping into the pool. However, it has also become one of the most rewarding parts of my fortnight.

My regular visits have allowed me to build some wonderful connections and gain a better understanding of another area of Grampians Health. Each campus has its own environment, staff, priorities, and ways of working. Visiting Stawell has helped me appreciate both the opportunities and challenges involved in providing equitable Library services across a regional and rural health service.

Over time, I have also started to become a recognised face at the campus. There is something very satisfying about arriving and hearing someone say, "The Librarian's here." It is a small comment, but it represents something much bigger. It means staff are recognising the service, know where to go for support, and understand that the Library is available to them, even without a permanent physical Library at their campus.

The Stawell Library service has reinforced for me that a Library is not defined only by a room, collection, or desk. Sometimes it is a laptop, a banner, some promotional material, and a Librarian willing to travel. More importantly, it is an opportunity to

improve access, start conversations, and become someone staff feel comfortable approaching for help.

Lesson 5: Health Librarianship Is Really About People

One of the biggest surprises of my first year was realising just how much Health Librarianship is built on relationships. Databases, collections, and technology are important, but they are only useful if people feel comfortable approaching the Library and asking for help.

Much of my work begins with a conversation. It might be a clinician looking for evidence to support practice, an educator preparing a training session, or a student trying to navigate an unfamiliar system. Sometimes people know exactly what they need. At other times, the conversation is about helping them work out what their question actually is. Listening, asking the right questions, and understanding the context are often just as important as finding the information.

I have particularly enjoyed talking with the medical and nursing students who use the Library. They bring energy, curiosity, and plenty of questions, and it is rewarding to help them find resources or make sense of the information available to them. Education sessions have also given me opportunities to meet staff and students who I may not otherwise have interacted with.

I have met some genuinely lovely people during my first year, although I am still learning names and faces. This is made slightly more challenging by student placements, staff rotations, and the simple fact that hospitals contain a lot of people. Just when I think I am beginning to recognise everyone, a new group arrives and I start again.

These relationships develop gradually through education sessions, campus visits, reference interactions, and brief conversations with people passing through the Library. Sometimes it is as simple as remembering what someone is working on, following up after a request, or asking how the kids went at football on Saturday. Some of my favourite moments this year have come from conversations. A successful search is satisfying, but so is seeing someone return to the Library because they know they will be welcomed and supported. My first year has taught me that Health Librarianship is not simply about connecting people with information. It is also about creating the relationships that make those connections possible.

Lesson 6: Finding My Professional Community

The importance of connection has not been limited to the staff and students I support. Finding my own professional community has been equally important during my first year.

It turns out there is an entire community of Health Librarians out there, and they are incredibly generous with their knowledge. Through Communities of Practice, the Gratis Committee, professional networks, and Health Libraries Australia (HLA), I have met people working in Health Libraries across Australia. These opportunities have shown me both the depth of knowledge within the profession and the generosity with which it is shared.

Joining Communities of Practice and the Gratis Committee has presented me an opportunity to see Health Librarians collaborating beyond their own organisations. At first, I often felt like the newest person in the room, listening to discussions while quietly trying to work out how everything fitted together. There were plenty of moments when I felt slightly lost and thoroughly impressed by everyone around me. Over time, however, these groups have helped me better understand the wider profession and the value of working together as a profession.

Attending HLA events and conferences was also a significant experience. I was very shy and convinced that I would not have anything to contribute. Fortunately, everyone in the Health Library world is welcoming, encouraging, and remarkably willing to share their knowledge. It was exciting to realise that there were so many people doing this highly specialised work, each bringing different experiences, ideas, and areas of expertise.

These experiences have shown me that learning in Health Librarianship does not happen in isolation. It happens through conversations, shared resources, committee work, presentations, and the reassuring knowledge that someone else has probably encountered a similar problem before.

I may still feel like the newest person in the room, but I am beginning to feel that I belong there. I still have plenty of questions, but I now know there is a generous and welcoming community of Health Librarians willing to help me find the answers.

Lesson 7: Nobody Warned Me About the IT Issues

Every workplace has its challenges. In Health Libraries, one of those challenges often arrives disguised as an IT problem. Access failures, authentication errors, broken links, booking difficulties, and systems that stop working for reasons known only to the systems themselves have all appeared during my first year.

Troubleshooting these problems has taught me much more about technology and systems than I expected to learn as a Health Librarian. Sometimes the solution is straightforward. Sometimes it involves several emails, multiple people, a collection of screenshots, and the familiar question: “Have you tried turning it off and on again?” Occasionally, the issue disappears without explanation, leaving everyone relieved but slightly suspicious.

One of my larger projects was overhauling the booking system for our IT Training Rooms. What initially sounded like a contained task involved reviewing existing processes, identifying problems, considering different users' needs, and working through the practical details of implementation. It reinforced that improving a system is not just about making the technology work. It is about making the process clear and usable for the people relying on it.

I am not sure the IT issues will ever disappear completely. For now, I have accepted that troubleshooting is part of the role, screenshots are valuable evidence and sometimes turning it off and on again really does work.

Lesson 8: The Invisible Impact of the Role

Before becoming a Health Librarian, I never imagined that Library work would involve literature searching one day and choosing hoodie designs the next. Some of this work is highly visible. Staff see the Pop-Up Library arrive, attend a training session, pick up a bookmark, or notice someone wearing a Grampians Health Library hoodie. Other work happens quietly behind the scenes through completed searches, supplied articles, recommended resources, and improved processes.

It is not always possible to see what happens next. I may never know whether an article helped answer a clinical question, an Evidence Update informed a discussion, or a training session gave someone greater confidence. Sometimes the only indication that the Library has been useful is when the same person returns with another question.

Even our marketing contributes to this quieter impact. The hoodies are fun, and I am certainly not complaining about being able to wear one to work, but they also make us recognisable and create opportunities for conversations that might not otherwise happen.

I do not provide patient care directly, but I have begun to appreciate that information itself can be part of patient care. Evidence supplied to a clinician, researcher, educator, or senior decision maker may contribute to a decision, project, policy, or improvement in practice. I may never see the final outcome, but I can help place reliable information into the hands of those making the decisions.

Much of the impact of a Health Library is quiet and difficult to trace. It exists in the questions answered, connections made, and evidence placed into the right hands. My first year has taught me that work does not need to be highly visible to be valuable.

One Year Later

More than twelve months into the role, I still have far more questions than answers. I am still learning, discovering new resources, admiring the things my experienced colleagues seem to "just know", and occasionally being defeated by technology. What has surprised me most is the sheer variety of the role. In a single week, I might track down an obscure article, deliver training, visit another campus, solve a booking problem, develop promotional material, and somehow squeeze in a literature search or two. Each request, conversation, project, and problem teaches me something new. I have also learned that Health Librarianship is not something anyone learns alone. I have been fortunate to work alongside knowledgeable colleagues, connect with Health Librarians across the profession, and build relationships with staff and students throughout Grampians Health. I do not yet have my colleagues' accumulated knowledge, and I am still working out what my own Librarian superpower might be, but I have become more confident in asking questions, trying new approaches, and accepting that not knowing the answer is often where the work begins.

If someone asked me today, what a Health Librarian does, I could give them a much better answer than I could twelve months ago. It would probably be a longer answer, too. I have learned enough to know that this is a profession full of generous people, fascinating challenges, quiet achievements, and endless opportunities to learn. That is more than enough to keep me coming back to see what the next year brings.