

## Libraries for Nursing: celebrating 35 years of supporting information for nurses

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Some of our newest Universities like to trace their existence back centuries through a variety of institutions to enhance their reputation and credibility. *Libraries for Nursing* (LfN) has no need to enhance those factors but it can trace its history, through a number of incarnations, all the way back to the second half of the twentieth century. This article is not meant to duplicate the article tracing the beginnings of the nursing specialist interest group published fifteen years ago (Wakeham, 2000), but, in the light of evolution of LfN into a working group of the *Health Libraries Group* (HLG), it offers a short reflection on the role of *Libraries for Nursing* over the years.

LfN, in its earliest manifestation, saw the light of day as an off shoot of the *Medical Health and Welfare Libraries Group* of the *Library Association* (MHWLG). The MHWLG became the *Health Libraries Group* in 1995. The MHWLG had a wide ranging membership of around 1800. Some of the members had an interest in supporting nursing libraries and had previously met under the auspices of the *Royal College of Nursing*

*Libraries Group* (formed in 1976), while Scottish librarians had been meeting separately as part of the *Association of Scottish Health Sciences Librarians* since 1975. At the MHLWG annual conference in 1980 a meeting was held in response to a circular from the *General Nursing Council* calling for a regional network of libraries to support nurses. From this came a Working Party which set up the *Nursing Interest Sub- Group* of the MHLWG of the *Library Association* (NISG), which held its inaugural meeting, with about 80 attendees, at the King's Fund Centre in London in November 1980. The NISG kept its initials when it became the *Nursing Information Subgroup* in 1986. When the name changed again in 1993 it at last became *Libraries for Nursing*, the LfN we know and love.

Obviously the NISG was a different organisation to the LfN of today and the changes in name reflect the ways that members at different times have seen themselves and the environments within which they are working. However, the aims and activities of the group over the years have been similar and the success of the group indicates that it continues to fulfil a need among its members.

The objectives of *Libraries for Nursing* are the same today as those of the original NISG:

- To provide a focal point for professional contact and discussion amongst qualified librarians/members of CILIP serving nurses
- To promote a dialogue between nurses and librarians and a greater understanding of the roles and functions of the two professions
- To bring together periodically all persons involved in the provision of library and information services for nurses

It is worth remembering that when NISG came into being nurse education took place within Schools of Nursing attached hospitals. Only around a third of library staff were qualified librarians. The rest would be secretaries or nurse tutors. Funding for libraries could be haphazard, if it existed at all (Wakeham, 2002, 43).

Nursing was not a graduate profession at that time and nurse training was much like an apprenticeship, with the emphasis on practice. Indeed the tension within nurse education between the academic approach and the work in the practice setting continues today. The early 1990s was a period of great change in nursing education as it moved into higher education (Royal College of Nursing (RCN), 2007 and Allen, 2009). Colleges of health and nursing merged into universities and often smaller libraries were closed (Moorbath, 1995). This could result in staff being made redundant or absorbed into the larger institution. Today nurses in training are students, rather than 'learners', and in some Universities they represent a sizeable minority of the student body.

As for qualified nurses – they might or might not have access to a library depending on what was arranged locally. The Royal College of Nursing (RCN) carried out a survey with LfN on the availability of access to libraries by trained staff in 1995. LfN supported a *Nursing Standard* / RCN campaign which ran for several months in 1997-98 in support of library access for qualified nurses (Bulletin, 1997).

LfN provides a means for library staff to meet together, to exchange knowledge and experiences. From the beginning there have been overseas members and, in theory, nurses could join. The group, in its

various iterations, has been managed by a Committee. At first this consisted of about half a dozen enthusiasts. Today there are approximately 10 contacts each with specific responsibilities. The Committee has always welcomed members from throughout the UK and from a wide range of institutions. Membership of the committee provides members who have limited opportunities for management type activities within their workplace to enhance their professional development, to meet with fellow professionals and influence the kinds of activity in which the group engages. Problems do sometimes arise when members leave because of job or career changes, or they just find that they do not have time to give to voluntary but potentially demanding activity, which helping to run a group like LFN is. Suffice to say that the community of health and nursing librarians has managed to keep the LfN show on the road for nearly three and a half decades.

In the early years the main form of communication was the *NIS Newsletter*. This later transformed into the *Libraries for Nursing Bulletin*. It has been possible to subscribe to the journal without being a member of the group. In fact, at times, the cost of producing the journal has become a problem, especially as members' organisations became less willing to subsidise its production, as occurred in the early days, though they may not always have realised it. The *Bulletin* provides information on a range of topics: reports on study days, surveys and research projects, book reviews, committee news, financial statements, current awareness lists and a wide range of original articles. These have included contributions from foreign members, in Spain, Australia and Nepal, for example. The *Bulletin* could provide novice article writers with the opportunity to dip a toe in the publication pond. The group, of course,

provided the occasional study day on “writing for publication” or similar, and editors were always willing to give advice.

Information could also be passed on at study days and workshops and through contributions to MHWLG and HLG conferences and *Under One Umbrella* meetings. These are probably, alongside the *Bulletin*, the major contribution of LfN to the library and information community.

Events have been organised on staff development, training users, critical appraisal, electronic resources, marketing services, evidence based healthcare, getting research into practice, service level agreements, accreditation, evaluating resources, and so on. Though mainly held in London, meetings were also held in various venues around the country. These were invariably well attended, well appraised and usually written up in *Bulletin*, *Health Libraries Review* or the *HLG Newsletter*.

In 1998 technology enabled LfN to bring a Mailbase discussion list to the membership, *LIS-nursing*. The list is still active. 2002 saw the creation of the group’s first web page. More recently the group has gotten to grips with Facebook (since 2011), Twitter (since 2009), Flickr (2011 onwards), Diigo (2010) and delicious, (since May 2012) in order to add value to membership. In at least one region, Yorkshire and Humberside, there has been an active sub-group of the Sub-group where members could meet locally.

The HLG still supports the production of Core Collections of recommended material. LfN was involved in the first *Core List for Nurses, Midwives and Health Visitors* (1998) which was put together by Jim Moore using information gathered by Committee members,

colleagues and practitioners. This was produced in collaboration with Tomlinsons, the booksellers, just one of the 'commercial' links that the group developed. Revised editions have been published, the latest being the 'Core collection for Nursing' in 2010 when *LibraryThing* was used to produce it online.

LfN was also a subscribing member of the LINC *Health Panel* and contributed funds to the production of the *Panel's* report on health information (1997). The group also supported, with others, the Research in the Workplace Award, which grew out of the *LINC Health Panel Research Horizon Scanning Task and Finish Group* in 1999 and which, with occasional interruptions, continues to support practitioner research to this day. LfN has been able to make small grants to pieces of research from time to time. Bursaries are also offered to individuals attending conferences for the first time, particularly those new to the profession or whose employers are unable to support them.

The group has also maintained links over the years with a variety of institutions such as the English National Board, the General Nursing Council, UNISON, the Department of Health and, of course, the Royal College of Nursing. While it has been one of the major health library groups it has also sought to work with others in the field, particularly in the joint organisation of Study Days. Examples of collaborating organisations are the LA / CILIP Health Libraries Group, SCONUL Health Libraries Group (which became the UHSL, which in turn became the UHMLG), IFMH (Information for the Management of Health Care), SHINE (the Scottish Health Information Network) and the Regional Librarians Group. In practice there is often some overlap of membership

between the various groups. The meetings are usually open to non-members as well, at a premium cost. In 2003 InFAH (Information Focus for Allied Health) disbanded as an HLG subgroup and LfN took on the role of representing members that worked with allied health professionals. A special issue of the *LfN Bulletin* was produced in 2005.

Nurse education and the practice of nursing have changed considerably over the last 35 years and nursing libraries have had to develop to deal with those changes. Nursing as a profession has moved away from its practical, vocational, process and ritual driven origins towards a more research and evidence based activity. Whether this is desirable and has been a positive change may be open to discussion but it has led to the need for the knowledge base of nursing to be developed and this has meant that libraries for nursing have had to evolve and to be available for nurses in training and those already qualified. For reasons of efficiency libraries used by nurses today are often multidisciplinary, serving the whole health community, especially where they are physically located in hospitals rather than universities. These developments have served to encourage librarians working with nurses to join together to share their experiences and ideas in groups such as LfN.

At the turn of the century membership of LfN stood at around 200. It is now less than 100. This partly reflects the decline in specifically nursing libraries, competition from other groups such as UHMLG or even the parent HLG itself, and economic pressures. It is also due to the fact that nursing librarians are themselves now often better qualified, more likely to be working in a multidisciplinary setting and communication between them is so much easier in the internet age. The group has continued to

provide regular and well evaluated study days and workshops, a regular printed journal in the form of the *LfN Bulletin* and a presence in a range of social media. All of this is carried out by changing clusters of volunteers in the form of the group Committee. This can itself be a source of tension as the activists tend to be a smallish body of people who may think that their efforts are not always appreciated by the larger membership.

LfN provides a forum through which librarians and others with an interest in providing information for students and qualified nurses can come together in both the real world and the virtual ones to share their knowledge and experiences. It has provided affordable education and professional development opportunities which benefit both members and the sector as a whole. Hopefully it will be able to continue to develop this role within its new incarnation



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