

## **At Ease – Incorporating slightly less serious books into the library collection**

Phillip Barlow

Senior Library Assistant - NHS Support  
Chelsea & Westminster Campus Library  
Imperial College London  
369 Fulham Road  
London SW10 9NH

Email: [p.barlow@imperial.ac.uk](mailto:p.barlow@imperial.ac.uk)

The book collection of a health library is, by necessity, quite serious, containing items on medical specialties, aspects of nursing, books on allied professions, management and finance, not to mention shelf upon shelf of MCQs, SMQs OSCEs and a thousand other acronyms intended to aid healthcare professionals in the passing of exams or the submission of coursework in order to maintain their professional development. We all know that that is important, otherwise why are we here? But, not to ~~sugarcoat~~ it, it makes the collection a bit...well, dull, and makes the library a place that people feel they have to come to, rather than one that they want to come to. It's for this reason, to make the collection a bit more interesting, not to mention accessible for all library users, that the library at Chelsea & Westminster Hospital has an unofficial "history and humour" section.

The library has always maintained a History of Medicine section as part of the collection, as this is a topic that is included as part of Imperial College's medical teaching (Imperial College, 2013). However, the items in this section are, in the main, dusty old tomes that tend to remain on the shelves with barely a second glance. By contrast, some of the books procured more recently, by authors such as Phil Hammond and Max Pemberton, which take a humorous look at the medical profession, have been borrowed quite extensively. This has led to the idea of advertising both the history titles and the humorous ones together to try and improve the circulation of less used items, as well as providing an impetus to purchase some newer titles.

As a starting point, we looked at some of the titles already in the collection and began procuring follow up books by the same authors. By using Amazon.co.uk to see what was available, we could make use of their suggestions tool for ideas on other, similar items that could also be considered, which enabled us to put together a small but fairly well patronised collection of titles written by doctors, about the humorous side of the medical profession; an example is *The Best Medicine* by Graeme Garden. Similarly, books about the funny side of nursing and midwifery were also identified; in these latter instances, many of the titles identified were memoirs of nurses or midwives, as opposed to titles written by people still employed in the professions, which then allowed us to simultaneously improve the collection of items looking at the history of nursing – possibly the most famous of these was *Call the Midwife* by Jennifer Worth. We have also begun purchasing titles

specifically relating to the history of medicine, both in a general way and looking at more specific individual topics. In doing this though, we have tried to navigate a path between the standard historical volume and something a little different, as indicated by the purchase of *Great Feuds in Medicine: Ten of the liveliest disputes ever* by Hal Hellman.

Of course, there is no point purchasing items such as these if they are just put on the shelf to disappear into the depths. We have found that people are browsing the shelves less and less, instead using the library catalogue to find the specific items that they are looking for, so the chances of happening across titles like these become smaller. It is for this reason that we have set up a "History and Humour" display opposite the library issue desk, with a selection of titles, both old and not so old. This is positioned in such a way that a user queuing up to approach the issue desk is stood adjacent to the display, and can browse what is there on offer while they wait. Its position also means that people entering or leaving the library have to pass it, meaning that it can grab their attention as well. This strategy seems to be working, as it is becoming rarer that items on the display are swapped around because they have been there for a while; more often now we are having to put items on empty book stands, because the previous book has been borrowed.

It should be stressed that this is not a priority – our main focus will always be maintaining the library's main collection, through the purchase of new titles and new editions of existing ones. However, getting to the end of the financial year often sees a

small amount of money left in the book budget, which, given the cost of books, won't go very far in procuring anything for the main collection. However, that last £50.00 may well be enough to buy several of the type of books described here, which we have found rarely cost more than £10.00 each. Additionally, if the library purchases items that can be viewed as "reading books" rather than "textbooks", it has the potential of encouraging more non-healthcare staff into the library, which can then show to them what else the library has to offer them, both in professional as well as personal terms. Knight (2012) describes the efforts of a health library in the 'Six Book Challenge' in promoting reading and literacy. By purchasing books that are attractive to a more general audience, it is possible that we may be able to do something similar.

## References

Imperial College London (2013) *MBBS/BSc Medicine* [Online]. Available from <http://www3.imperial.ac.uk/ugprospectus/facultiesanddepartments/medicine/mbbsmedicine> [Accessed 27/02/13]

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