

# Health Sciences Librarians



## Occupational Brief Title Codes:

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## Occupational Subtitles:

- Acquisitions Librarians
- Catalogers
- Chief Librarians
- Circulation Librarians
- Library Directors

## Work Classification Based Related

### D.O.T. Occupations:

- Archivists
- Children's Librarians
- Curators
- Music Librarians

## Interests Based Related

### G.O.E. Occupations:

- Bookmobile Librarians
- Career-Guidance Technicians
- Film-Rental Clerks
- Shelving Supervisors

## Skills Based Related

### O\*NET Occupations:

- Computer and Information Systems Managers
- Education Administrators, Elementary and Secondary School
- First-Line Supervisors, Customer Service
- Library Technicians

## Noteworthy Quote:

*"One of the many satisfactions in being a health sciences librarian is providing current medical information which healthcare professionals use to treat patients. In this, and in guiding lay users to quality health resources, the health sciences librarian needs excellent people skills, technological competence, a detective's inquisitiveness and attention to detail, and an enthusiasm for lifelong learning."*

—Anne C. Tomlin, Medical Librarian,  
Auburn Memorial Hospital, Auburn,  
New York

**Health sciences librarians** (ˈhealth ˈsci-ences li-ˈbrar-i-ans) maintain medical libraries and offer efficient access to medical and health-related information in the form of printed products, computer databases, CD-ROMS, online catalogs, E-mail, audiovisuals, and other multimedia materials.

Health sciences libraries evolved as a result of an explosion of information in the field of medicine. More medical and health literature has been published in the past ten years than in all the years before put together. Research continues to lead the way to new breakthroughs in genetic engineering, pharmaceutical products, and advanced biomedical instrumentation, to mention a few. New medical treatments, tests, equipment, procedures, and techniques affect the way medical personnel treat illness and injuries. All these developments add to the knowledge that must be made available to medical professionals, educators, administrators, researchers and technicians, medical and allied health students, dentists, social workers, pharmacists, and other health sciences practitioners.

To keep up with these ongoing developments both in research and information technology, health sciences librarians must have a knowledge of a wide range of scholarly and public information services relating to medicine and health care. They must acquire the most advanced skills relating to publishing and computers, as well as the systems used for presenting information to library users. Today, librarians with skills in computer and information systems plan and operate computer systems, and design information storage and retrieval systems. They also develop methods for collecting, organizing, interpreting, and classifying information in medical schools and teaching hospitals.

## Work Performed

Health sciences librarians are responsible for collecting, compiling, and distributing information on the health sciences. They give people access to library resources and educate them about their use. They also give outreach to health care workers in rural and inner-city settings. The staff of a large health sciences library may consist of several health sciences librarians, each an expert in one or two specialties, and several technical assistants. In a small medical library one health sciences librarian, with or without help from assistants, does most of the work.

As **directors** or **chief librarians**, health sciences librarians in administrative positions carry out the directives of the governing body such as a board of trustees. They submit recommendations to the board and carry out their decisions. As administrators, they plan and direct programs of library services and develop cooperative relationships with other libraries. They conduct staff meetings and coordinate the activities of the different departments. They often interview and hire job applicants, rate staff performance, and promote employees.

In preparing budgets, which they submit to the governing body, directors and other administrators analyze departmental expenses, estimate projected outlay, and determine methods to control expenses. They perform grant writing and fund raising tasks. They spend much of their time building relationships with health care professionals, and rallying support for ongoing library services and projects.

In a small medical library, administrators may also review and evaluate orders for materials, and confer with others outside the library to select new materials.

**Acquisitions librarians** choose and purchase materials that best support the specialties of the hospital departments or health sciences school. Using their knowledge of both library science and the health sciences, they review the products of vendors and may circulate selection lists to department heads for comments. Materials selected range from books and journals to databases and resources available on the World Wide Web.

In selecting purchases and their vendors, they may consider prices, discounts, and delivery schedules. Acquisitions librarians also keep records on funds, purchases, and prices. They monitor overall spending to keep within the budget for library materials. They are also responsible for deselecting, canceling, or extracting outdated or unused materials by analyzing collection usage statistics.

**Catalogers** compile, organize, and integrate information on collections in a computerized database so that searchers and users can identify what the library owns and locate the material. In most libraries, this database will also be in the form of a print card catalog. Information for each cataloged item includes title, author, publisher, date of publication, illustrations, appendices, subject headings, table of contents, and location or Internet address. To allow people access to collections on the World Wide Web, these librarians may be involved in the development of Web sites or databases. Catalogers may also oversee the activities of other workers in the technical services or cataloging department.

**Circulation librarians** manage the lending of materials to individuals and other libraries. They supervise desk assistants who check books, tapes, CD-ROMS, and other materials in and out of the library. They find resources for library users. These librarians answer mail and telephone requests for information, and may help health care personnel track down hard-to-find information. Through participation in national networks they can access books, articles, and multimedia materials from libraries nationwide.

In-depth reference questions are handled by **reference librarians**. Using computerized databases, and computer information systems such as the Internet, reference librarians can produce complete and current bibliographies. Bibliographies are lists of publications and materials on almost any medical or health-related subject, such as Hodgkin's disease or AIDS. They compile a list of articles, books, journals, software, and other printed or electronic products appropriate for the purposes of the user. They may also prepare abstracts and reviews for teaching staff and students.

These librarians often act as teachers to help users develop searching skills to get the information they need. They may conduct workshops to teach faculty, staff, and students how to search databases, manage information, and

work with bibliographic topics. They may instruct library users about navigating the Internet, and then help them make decisions about the quality of the information they have found.

Some librarians work as **outreach librarians**. They are responsible for taking library services to health care professionals. Acting as circuit riders, they visit several hospitals or clinics within a geographic region. They perform searches, get journal articles through interlibrary loan, and find Web sites that are used by health care professionals and health consumers. Outreach librarians plan and teach classes in places where there is no health sciences library or librarian.

Many medical school libraries employ librarians who are educated in preservation, archives, or special collections development. These librarians may have special knowledge about the preservation of old printed materials using another medium such as a CD-ROM or other digitalized format. In addition to books and journals, these librarians usually work with special collections donated to the library by faculty and alumni. Photographs and artifacts are often included in historical collections.

### **Working Conditions**

Health sciences librarians usually work in pleasant surroundings. The storage of print materials and the extensive use of computer systems and other equipment requires a controlled environment. Health sciences librarians may sit or stand while working. Some spend a significant amount of time at a computer workstation. Health sciences librarians also have opportunities to work outside the library, visiting departments in the institution and giving off-site demonstrations and training.

The work is not physically strenuous, but usually requires some lifting of materials, and bending to retrieve printed information. Patience is needed when tracking down hard to find information. These librarians interact with all kinds of people, and work under a moderate amount of stress. They talk to and assist physicians, researchers, students, and others in their search for informative material. They need excellent interviewing skills to gather needed information from people who are looking for materials. Often they must meet short deadlines in their search for reference materials.

### **Hours and Earnings**

Full-time health sciences librarians work from thirty-eight to forty-five hours a week, often on a rotating schedule of daily, weekend, and evening shifts. Some hospitals and medical schools hire part-time librarians. Professional meetings, continuing education, and workshops may require some travel.

In general, salaries of health sciences librarians vary with the education and experience of the librarian, the job,

the employer, and the geographic location. According to a survey by the Medical Library Association, in 2001, the average starting salary for medical librarians with less than two years of experience was \$40,080 a year. Overall, medical librarians earned an average of nearly \$50,000 a year. Medical library directors and other administrators earned anywhere from \$47,689 to \$175,854 a year.

Benefits usually include health insurance, paid vacations, sick leave, and retirement plans. Part-time workers usually do not get benefits.

### **Education and Training**

Health sciences librarians must have a master's degree in library science (MLS) from a program accredited by the American Library Association (ALA). To enter such programs, candidates must have a bachelor's degree. Medicine and its allied disciplines are so varied that undergraduate study can consist of any of several fields. Biological sciences, behavioral and social sciences, and physical sciences are all excellent preparation. Students should also take courses in information and computer science. A good reading knowledge of at least one foreign language can be helpful as well.

MLS programs may last one-year or two-years. Most programs in librarianship offer courses in health sciences information. Course work generally includes science literature; biomedical communications; evaluation, selection, and use of bibliographic resources in medicine and allied sciences; organization and administration of the medical library; budgeting, personnel, and book selection; and use of computers to create and retrieve electronic information. Most courses are adapted to educate librarians in the use of advancing technologies such as online reference systems, Internet search methods, and Web site creation and design.

Some library science programs offer internships or fellowships in health sciences librarianship. The National Library of Medicine, for instance, offers an internship for those who have completed a master's degree program in library science. Many schools also offer graduate work leading to a doctoral degree.

The ever-broadening scope of science and medicine forces health sciences librarians to keep up with a constant flow of new information. To keep abreast of the latest advances, techniques, and services in health sciences librarianship, many of these professionals attend meetings, continuing education courses, and workshops.

### **Professional Societies**

The Medical Library Association (MLA) has a membership of more than 800 institutions and 3,600 professionals in the health information field. This organization publishes books, a newsletter, and a journal. It has information on library school courses, internships, and

scholarships, and offers a comprehensive program of continuing education. It publishes standards for health sciences libraries and it monitors government activity that affects libraries.

The MLA also offers professional recognition through membership in the Academy of Health Information Professionals—renewable every five years. A candidate must submit a portfolio of professional activities that may qualify him or her for academy membership at any of four progressive stages. Although voluntary, the earnings for academy members are about 5 to 33 percent higher than the earnings of individuals without this recognition.

The Special Libraries Association (SLA), with roughly 15,000 members, serves industry, business, research, education, news, trade and professional organizations, and other institutions that produce or use special information. Other groups include the American Library Association (ALA), the Association for Library and Information Science Education (ALISE), and the Health Sciences Communications Association (HeSCA).

### **Personal Qualifications**

Health sciences librarians must have an inquiring mind and a sense of order. The ability to work quickly and to find materials requires a methodical, detail-oriented mind. Health sciences librarians must have excellent communications skills. Poise, initiative, and intelligence are also necessary. A good memory, patience, accuracy, and perseverance are all important.

Occupations can be adapted for workers with disabilities. Persons should contact their school or employment counselors, their state office of vocational rehabilitation, or their state department of labor to explore fully their individual needs and requirements as well as the requirements of the occupation.

### **Where Employed**

Health sciences librarians work throughout the United States. About two thirds of all health sciences librarians work in hospitals, medical schools, and medical centers. They are also employed in schools of nursing, pharmacy, veterinary medicine, and allied health. Some work in state and federal agencies, in research centers, or in other health-related organizations. A few work for pharmaceutical companies, publishers, or vendors. Most jobs for health sciences librarians are in and around large cities.

### **Employment Outlook**

Medical publishing is a growing industry. Each year the National Library of Medicine receives about 24,000 periodicals and serials. Over two million articles in the biomedical sciences are published annually. Expanding medical centers, health and health-related institutions, and pharmaceutical and biotechnology companies will require

health sciences librarians. Replacement needs should also account for many additional openings.

The growing use of computer information storage and retrieval systems is changing the skills needed by librarians. These systems make cataloging easy, so that technicians and clerical assistants can use them. Nevertheless, librarians will still be in demand to direct staff, help users search databases, and deal with complex reference requests. More and more, librarians are also applying their information management and research skills to arenas outside of libraries, including database development, reference tool development, information systems, publishing, Internet coordination, marketing, Web content management and design, and training of database users. Those skilled in computer and online technologies for medical and health sciences information will have the best prospects.

### Entry Methods

Persons interested in library careers should try to get a job in a school, public, or special library where they can observe the work firsthand. Working with computers, shelving, data input, filing, mail sorting, and other clerical tasks are good experience for people interested in becoming professional librarians. Internships are also available in many larger libraries.

Graduates of library science programs may get help in their job search from their school's career services office. To find work, prospective health sciences librarians may answer ads or position announcements in professional journals and newsletters. The MLA, SLA, and other similar organizations operate job placement services and maintain current listings of open positions. Those interested in federal government jobs should apply at any regional branch of the Office of Personnel Management or at a federal job information center.

### Advancement

Health sciences librarians advance by showing initiative, imagination, hard work, and leadership ability. The chances for advancement are better in large medical centers with large staffs and many departments. A health sciences librarian in charge of a section may become an assistant director or director of the library. The chances for advancement in small libraries are more limited, however. Entrepreneurial librarians sometimes start their own consulting practices. Acting as freelance librarians or information brokers, they provide services to other libraries, businesses, or government agencies.

### For Further Research

**Health and Sciences Communications Association**,  
39 Wedgewood Drive, Suite A, Jewett City, CT 06351-2420.  
Web site: [www.hesca.org](http://www.hesca.org)

**Medical Library Association**, 65 East Wacker Place,  
Suite 1900, Chicago, IL 60601-7298. Web site:  
[www.mlanet.org](http://www.mlanet.org)

**Special Libraries Association**, 1700 Eighteenth Street,  
N.W., Washington, DC 20009. Web site: [www.sla.org](http://www.sla.org)

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