

NHS Library and Knowledge Services
Guidance for Library Assistants on Providing Health Information to
Patients and the Public

Knowledge for Healthcare Vision statement:

NHS bodies, their staff, learners, **patients and the public** use the right knowledge and evidence, at the right time, in the right place, enabling high quality decision- making, learning, research and innovation to achieve excellent healthcare and health improvement. (1)

Introduction

This guidance has been produced to help library assistants provide information to patients and the public. Detailed information can be found in the [NHS Library and Knowledge Services Guidance for providing Patient and Public Information](#).

There is a real need for patients and the public to have access to high quality, reliable health information. As patients are being encouraged to self-manage and be partners in their care they need access to a range of resources tailored to their literacy level.

So what does this mean for me as a library assistant?

See also: [Dealing with Enquiries](#)

Your role is to:

- direct patients and the public to good quality resources, which they might either read for themselves, or have read to them, and which they can assimilate in their own time. You should **not** impart advice, i.e. present the facts but do not interpret them.
- use your skills to signpost people to high quality information. Inform the enquirer that you are not qualified to advise them about their individual case but that you can direct them to, or give them information.
- ensure patients and the public are aware that any information given will **never** replace the advice given by a trained health professional. All patients and their carers should address their concerns to a qualified healthcare professional, who can address these directly.
- ensure information is not supplied unsolicited; it should only be given to the person requesting the information (this may include relatives or carers), and should not be forwarded to third parties.
- treat any information given to you in the course of an enquiry in confidence. You should always treat the person with dignity and respect. Do NOT act as a friend or confidante to patients who visit your library.

It is important to be clear about your boundaries and know your own limits.

Why will patients and the public visit the hospital library?

Patients are now more involved in their own care and there is also a lot of health information available on the internet and in the media. Patients often want to be better informed, which is encouraged by health professionals because this often results in better outcomes for patients. People seeking this information may come to the library. Working in an NHS Library, we need to act as signposts to the information that patients and the general public need, enabling them to become active participants in their health and wellbeing.

The hospital library is often signposted and so patients and members of the public may wander in to use the library as a place to sit, read or access the public wifi independently on their own device. For more information, visit [Types of Service](#) that libraries can offer.

How should I welcome patients who enter the library?

Answer any questions they might have re: directions (Where can I get a cup of tea? Where are the toilets? Is it OK for me to sit and read here?). Dealing with patients or members of the public is no different from dealing with a member of staff. If the behaviour of the person is inappropriate then you should seek assistance from other colleagues and, if necessary, escalate the level of help by calling security. You are unlikely to encounter difficulties but always raise any concerns with senior colleagues.

What should I do if the patient is upset?

Some patients or their carers may be distressed. If you are uncomfortable dealing with people who are upset (they may also be angry, confused etc.) ask them to take a seat and find a colleague who is better equipped to deal with the person and their query.

What should I do if the person wants reference access?

Your role will be to assist the patient/ member of the public to find the article they require. If the library does not hold a copy of the item the person wants then it would be appropriate to suggest they visit their public library where they can request an inter-library loan. Check if something similar can be found which will answer the person's question by checking your library catalogue and look in your Health and Wellbeing collection if your library has one.

What should I do if the person has a specific health-related query?

Your role is to help the patient or member of the public to find the information they require. You can look at the [list of useful websites](#) including NHS Choices (you could share the [NHS Choices Guide](#)). You could share the leaflet on [Finding good quality health information on the internet](#). Your trust may have a relevant patient information leaflet that you can give them.

Can patients use our computers?

If you have non-networked PCs you may let them look up information for themselves. [Some resources are available via open access](#) but e-resources controlled by licence are not generally accessible to the public except where local IT policy allows use of an NHS OpenAthens walk-in account. If local policy prevents non-NHS access to the network then you will need to explain that you would breach licence terms to provide an OpenAthens account or any form of remote access to e-resources. See [OpenAthens eligibility criteria](#).

If patients or the public bring in their own device you could help them login to the public wifi system and find suitable, quality resources on the internet. The public library also has computers the public may use.

What if a member of staff wants to find patient information?

The resources to which you would direct healthcare staff for use with the patients are the same as those you would direct the patients to themselves. If the person wants more detailed information then it would be appropriate to ask a qualified librarian in your library to help.

Can I direct someone to the public library?

Your role is to decide whether your own library or the public library is better equipped to provide

for the person's information needs. Your library may collaborate with the local public library to provide health information. You might already know what services your public library provides. If not, information will be on the public library website. It is likely that your public library will stock [Books On Prescription](#) or your library may stock them too and/or display leaflets promoting these items. There are likely to be books on health and wellbeing in your public library too and you could advise patients and the public to visit the public library and borrow items from them. If your library does not hold the relevant information, refer the enquirer to the public library to request an inter-library loan (there is usually a small charge) or to borrow a book or use their computers.

What should I do if a patient/ member of the public wants to borrow an item from stock?

It may be preferable to advise the person to go to their public library to borrow the item from them. Make sure you help them to check your local public library catalogue first to ensure they do not have a wasted journey. You could perhaps ring the public library to reserve the item. Your library may allow members of the public to join for a fee, but this is usually more expensive than a potential one-off borrowing would be. You might also find it cheaper to locate the book on a commercial online website or in a local book shop; the person could purchase the item if they wished.

If you allow individuals to join your library on a fee-paying basis, you might offer loans and inter-library loans as part of this provision.

What should I do if the patient/member of the public wants to make a copy of the information I have found?

Your library may make a charge for providing a printing, photocopying or scanning service. You should assist the person by explaining the charging mechanism and show them how to use the printing/copying facilities, as you would anyone new to using these services.

What should I do if the patient has no money with them?

It is at the library's discretion whether to provide the information free of charge in such cases. Ask about your library's policy.

Can I photocopy articles for a patient or member of the public?

You may make 'library privilege' copies of material from stock for members of the public, or they may make their own 'fair dealing' copies. In both cases, the copying may only be for private study or non-commercial research, and the amount copied must be 'fair' (one article from a journal or 5% of/one chapter from a book is suggested). In addition, the NHS CLA Licence allows single paper copies to be made from stock for patients and carers. You do not have to charge, but may do so.

What happens if I am unsure I am giving the right information to a patient or member of the public?

If you follow these guidelines you are going to provide safe information, but it is sensible to include a disclaimer and the following is suggested:

Suggested disclaimer on any information provided

Information and advice on sources of information is given in good faith but should never be used as a substitute for seeking medical advice. We have taken care to direct you to reliable information but cannot guarantee its accuracy. You should always consult a suitably qualified doctor or healthcare professional for diagnosis and treatment of medical conditions.

Remember that whenever you provide information you should always have regard to organisational policies on IT access, e-mail/internet use and confidentiality.