



## Case Western Library Bridges the Gap Between Health and Law

by Cheryl Smith Cheatham

**H**ave you ever considered learning a new research methodology; becoming familiar with a vast array of journals, e-journals and text literature; and getting to know librarians from an entirely different discipline? Sound like a challenge? Well, that's what I have been doing for the last year and it has been a daunting but enlightening experience.

I have been a reference and educational media librarian at Case Western Reserve University School of Law for 10 years. Throughout that time, Case has operated a successful faculty liaison program, with faculty assigned to librarians in a more or less random way. Although never an exclusive relationship, the liaison program has fostered better communication among individual faculty and their "consultant" librarians.

But recently, the faculty organized and restructured much of the curriculum into subject-related concentration areas, several of which focus on the law school's centers of excellence, including the Frederick Cox International Law Center; the Law-Medicine Center; and the Law, Technology and the Arts Center. The creation of concentrations

parallels the growing number of interdisciplinary specialties offered at Case Western Reserve University's graduate schools. Seven dual-degree health programs at the CWRU law school combine legal education with other studies: e.g., a J.D./M.P.H. (public health), J.D./M.D. (medicine) and J.D./M.B.A. (management).

Because I previously worked in a university science library as a graduate student and taught an advanced research class session on science and law, I was asked to work with the Law-Medicine Center. Founded in 1953, the CWRU Law-Medicine Center is the oldest law school-based center of legal medicine and health law in the United States. Special programs include *Health Matrix*, a student-edited health law journal; the Health Law Clinic; the Student Health Law Association, which sponsors lectures and symposia; and the Health Law Research Institute, which conducts empirical research on health-law issues.

As the liaison to the Law-Medicine Center, its faculty and students, my challenge was to become familiar with health resources and databases, create professional relationships and network with my counterparts at the medical libraries on campus, and enhance my medical research skills to better prepare law students for medical research. I received on-the-job training by shadowing some of the medical reference librarians for two months during the summer.

At Case Western Reserve University, all libraries on campus are linked together through an online catalog, EuclidPlus. Through OhioLink, all libraries on campus have access to the same research databases and e-journals. However, access to these databases doesn't mean the user automatically understands how to retrieve meaningful results from Medline or Ovid Evidence-Based Medicine.

After users asked a few questions at the medical reference desk, I was convinced my cross-training efforts would pay dividends for both the law and medical libraries. The questions law students posed to the medical librarians revealed the shortcomings in the students' medical research techniques. For instance, despite having identical research databases online, none of the law students accessed them before walking across campus to the medical library. Armed with a list of citations, law students rarely investigated the

full-text online medical databases before heading to the medical library. Even brief exposure to the fundamentals of medical research *before* visiting the medical library could save time, limit frustration and lead to more substantive reference interviews at both libraries.

Another way to quickly immerse oneself in a new discipline is to join a professional association. I became a member of the Midwest Chapter of the Medical Library Association and attended its conference in October 2001 in Milwaukee. I selected a regional meeting because it is ideally suited to meeting new people in a less crowded, more relaxed atmosphere. Throughout the three-day meeting, medical librarians shared experiences based on practical situations and common interests.

Reading another library association's publications is extremely worthwhile. Like *Law Library Journal*, the *Journal of the Medical Library Association* is a valuable source of substantive library literature and research. Articles on mentoring; developing customized patron services; and the newest term for librarian, "informationists," are available online through PubMed Central at [www.pubmedcentral.nih.gov](http://www.pubmedcentral.nih.gov).

This first-hand look at a new discipline reminded me of the fundamental importance of belonging to professional associations and attending meetings. The face-to-face discussions and small group interactions are where the real learning begins. The medical librarians often asked me why a law librarian would attend their regional conference. I soon realized how rarely librarians cross-train in different disciplines of the profession. Yet the benefits of the multidisciplinary approach are numerous: Networking with another group of librarians creates and extends professional comradeship; shared experiences and problem-solving quickly become an informal means of identifying best practices applicable in all libraries.

While both law and medical libraries are constantly incorporating new technologies into their patron services, the practices of medical libraries in this case could be very helpful to law libraries. Frequently in transit within or outside of the hospital setting, physicians rely on

clinical information from reference materials accessible electronically on personal digital assistants. Lawyers increasingly expect the same portability. Because the sciences have been the leader in publishing primary documents in electronic form only, medical libraries have extensive experience on the migration of periodicals from print to digital format. Academic law libraries can draw on that experience for their own documentation.

Becoming a multidisciplinary librarian has been a valuable opportunity for me. Describing my experiences to medical librarians at a regional conference was a great way to share best practices from my school and library and learn about new procedures and techniques that I can apply to my library. On a larger scale, encouraging a multidisciplinary approach to librarianship creates an enriching new source of members for library professional associations and conferences. My

multidisciplinary outlook has also broadened my scope of duties at the law school. For example, I'm helping my law school upgrade the Law-Medicine Center Web pages and establish an intranet that is useful and accessible to law students, faculty and staff.

So becoming familiar with libraries in other disciplines not only better positions law librarians to anticipate trends but extends their "big-picture" perspective of their libraries and the profession.

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