



Applied Communication Technology . Information . Organizations . Networks

**Librarian Assisted Health Information Seekers**

## **Vancouver Public Library Health Information Seeker Survey: Preliminary Summary of Findings**

February 10, 2005

**Purpose of survey:** To understand what role the public library plays in patron's health information seeking, and specifically, whether or not library patrons consulted the internet prior to seeking help from a librarian, or planned on consulting the internet after obtaining assistance from a librarian.

**Description of survey instruments and procedures:** This written survey consisted of both open-ended and multiple choice questions. Respondents were asked by librarians in the Science and Technology section and the Social Science section of the main branch of Vancouver Public Library to complete a survey if the patron asked a health-related question. The survey was provided in English. The majority of questionnaires were filled out by patrons in the Science and Technology section as that is where the majority of "health related" questions were asked.

Survey questions explored information seeking patterns for health information. Respondents were asked to access their health status and their confidence in locating health information resources. As a follow-up to general questions about health information resources, respondents were asked about their awareness/usage of the BC HealthGuide Handbook, the Canadian Health Network website, the Vancouver Public Library health web site, and provincial and federal health websites. The survey concluded with demographic questions about age, family composition, education, income, occupation, postal code, housing type, primary language spoken at home and cultural/racial background.

**Research dates:** Surveys were distributed during October and November 2004. Fifty (50) surveys were completed during this timeframe. 56% of library patrons informed about the survey indicated a willingness to complete the survey. 44% of patrons informed about the survey completed and returned the survey.

### **Findings include:**

Profile of survey respondents:

- 54% were **under 40 years** of age
- 74% were **female**
- 54% had a **University or higher degree**
- 60% of respondents stated that their **racial/ethnic background was White**. 22% of respondents were Chinese, 8% were European; and 4% were Aboriginal.
- 20% stated their household income was \$20,000 or under; 25% were from households with incomes in excess of \$50,000 per year.
- **English was the primary language** spoken at home for 74% of respondents; 14% came from households using an Asian or South Asian language.
- 52% lived in an apartment, townhouse or condo; 42% lived in single, detached, or duplex form of housing; 48% were renters; 36% were owners (16% did not respond to this question).
- About **1/3 of respondents planned to visit a doctor** regarding the health condition/issue they were seeking information about.
  - Another third of respondents were seeking information on behalf of someone else.



SIMON FRASER  
UNIVERSITY



Social Sciences and Humanities  
Research Council of Canada

Conseil de recherches en  
sciences humaines du Canada

Vancouver  
Coastal Health  
Research Institute  
*Healthier lives through discovery*



Applied Communication Technology . Information . Organizations . Networks

### **Internet Use Among Health Information Seekers Who Sought Librarian Assistance**

- 44% of respondents had consulted the internet prior to asking a librarian for help locating health information.
- Patrons under 40 years of age were more likely to have consulted the internet prior to seeking help from a librarian than those over 40 years of age.
- Those who had attended or completed university were more likely to have consulted the internet for health information prior to seeking help from a librarian than patrons who had not attended university.

Respondents were asked if they were aware of the following sources for health-information:

**BC HealthGuide** handbook – 48%

**Canadian Health Network website** – 32%

**Vancouver Public Library Consumer Health website** – 22%

**Canadian Government Sponsored (Federal/Provincial) health websites** – 34%

Doctors (62%), the internet (24%) and librarians (16%) were the **top three most trusted sources for health information.**

Overall, our respondents were **fairly confident** in their ability to seek out, find and evaluate health information on the internet.

- Those who did NOT list the internet as one of their top three initial sources of information were much less likely to state that they felt confident in seeking out and evaluating health information on the internet.
- Of those who sought on-line health information prior to seeking help from a librarian,
  - 80.9% indicated they knew where to find helpful information on the internet;
  - 85.7% agreed they knew how to find helpful information on the internet,
  - 71.4% indicated they knew how to tell high quality resources from low quality resources on the internet.

#### Future research plans in library setting:

We have begun observing on-line health information seeking classes offered by Canadian Health Network staff at Vancouver Public Library, in order to better understand the challenges patrons face as they begin seeking health information on-line. Follow-up interviews with patrons who attended on-line health information seeking classes will allow us to develop a more in depth understanding of the challenges people face as they search for and try to make sense of on-line health information.

#### **Summary and Policy Implications**

- The internet is not a substitute for other forms of information for all populations; investment in other forms of information delivery aimed at less educated, less affluent Canadians and those with literacy barriers is essential to universal, equitable healthcare.
- Librarians play an important role for information seekers, even for those confident in their on-line abilities. Designing information intensive programs around human information intermediaries may improve the outcomes of programs that utilize the internet as a means of health information delivery.

---

**Ellen Balka, Ph.D., Principal Investigator**

School of Communication, 8888 University Way, Simon Fraser University, Burnaby, B.C. V5A 1S6

Phone: (604) 725-2756 Web: [www.sfu.ca/act4hlth](http://www.sfu.ca/act4hlth) E-mail: [ellenb@sfu.ca](mailto:ellenb@sfu.ca)