

## **SCOPES OF PRACTICE – HEALTH LIBRARIANS IN THE HEALTH WORKFORCE JIGSAW**

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### **ABSTRACT**

The Australian health workforce is undergoing significant change. In response to these changes health librarians need to systematically position their skills and areas of work among a jigsaw of health professions. Drawing on the work of other professions in the health care system the author proposes the creation of a Scope of Practice and Competency Based Standards for entry to and revalidation in the health librarian profession as a mechanism for enabling systematic change.

### **1. BACKGROUND**

Australia's health care system is reforming to meet a range of challenges including maintaining access to high quality and safe services, the growing burden of chronic disease, an ageing population and the costs of new technologies. Critical to the success of the National Health and Hospitals Reform Commission's blueprint for reform is a review of the health workforce and maximising the use of existing human resources to improve efficiencies and reduce costs.

This is being achieved through the establishment of Health Workforce Australia to produce more effective, streamlined and integrated clinical training arrangements and to support workforce reform initiatives. Concurrently the Australian Health Practitioner Regulation Agency [1] has been established to implement a national registration system for a significant percentage of the health professional workforce in Australia. In these and future workforce initiatives the role of a scope of practice for each health profession will be crucial to identifying the practices an individual is trained, competent, authorised and legally able to perform.

Most Australian health professions have a defined scope of practice as the foundation for their professional boundaries and for guiding entry to and ongoing participation in their profession [2,3,4]. As professionals and subspecialists in the health care sector, librarians need to act quickly to define their scope of practice before they are relegated to non professional, often administrative roles requiring few or no qualifications, training, knowledge or experience. This trend may be accelerated by

the emergence of interdisciplinary education for entry level health professionals and the consequent role expansion of many health professions into domains of health librarians' practice.

As the 2010 Health Libraries Australia Nexus survey [5] has revealed, Australian health librarians are a small, mature, stable workforce that typically functions in isolation or in small numbers across a range of settings with limited rigorous professional standards. Thus they are vulnerable to significant risks posed by workplace and technological changes. The absence of a scope of practice and related competencies [6] reinforces health librarians' vulnerability. However these risks can be mitigated by addressing skills and knowledge deficits and by moving into changing roles [7,8]. To mitigate these risks systematically a scope of practice and related competency based standards will help strengthen education for and revalidation in the profession. They will also provide a process to enable new and emerging roles to be developed sustainably.

In the absence of a legislative requirement for regulation of the profession, the role defaults to the Australian Library and Information Association (ALIA). It is proposed that ALIA reconsider the criteria for membership and in line with international developments [9,10]] make membership dependent upon maintaining the currency of professional practice via a credentialing and accreditation scheme based on continuing professional development. The role of ALIA in recognising education for entry to the profession also requires renewal and the current *Re-conceptualising and re-positioning Australian library and information science education for the twenty-first century* [11] research project provides an opportunity to influence future standards and mechanisms of education for entry and revalidation within the profession.

## **2. SCOPES OF PRACTICE**

### **2.1. Purpose and definition of a scope of practice for health librarians**

The purpose of a scope of practice for health librarians is to inform employers, the public / clients, educators and other professionals of the range of activities undertaken by the profession. As such it is a dynamic document reflecting the changing profession and it articulates with other related documents such as competencies and principles of practice or codes of ethics for the particular profession. It would also sensitively provide guidance for the development and content of health librarian education programs and act as a reference for practising members continuing professional development.

Essentially a scope of practice may be defined as the rules, regulations and boundaries within which a fully qualified practitioner with substantial and appropriate training, knowledge, and experience may practice in a specifically defined field. Such practice is also governed by requirements for continuing education and professional accountability. Or more succinctly: recording the functions that an individual is trained, competent, authorised and legally able to perform.

Once a profession has a scope of practice documented, there is an ability to consider advanced or extended practice. This allows a profession to develop specific additional skills and abilities in particular areas which can be recognised by the employer or public and may inform career structure.

## 2.2. Suggested elements for a Scope of practice for health librarians in Australia

Instead of a rigid and narrow list of work tasks /activities that may restrict opportunities for individuals and the profession alike, a Scope of practice for Australian health librarians is a document that sets boundaries for typical practice. To facilitate ease of comparison with other health care professions and to help fit the jigsaw pieces together the terminology and definitions suggested in Table 1 below are consistent with other health sector scope of practice documents [12]. This is not a comprehensive listing but an example of what scope of practice for Health librarians in Australia may look like.

<b>SCOPE OF PRACTICE FOR HEALTH LIBRARIANS IN AUSTRALIA</b>
<p><b>Population (Who)</b></p> <p>This section describes the recipients of health librarians' services in Australia. For example in Australia health librarians may work with:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Students undertaking formal and ongoing education:<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>○ Entry level (undergraduate and postgraduate entry), e.g.: GMC, courses)</li><li>○ Postgraduate</li><li>○ From tertiary preparation to post doctoral and advanced career researchers</li></ul></li><li>• Clinicians</li><li>• Patients, their families, caregivers, friends and colleagues</li><li>• General public / community</li><li>• Other professionals:<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>○ Health workers</li><li>○ Educators</li></ul></li></ul>
<p><b>Services (What)</b></p> <p>Health librarians may undertake:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Client assessment<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>○ Information needs assessment (i.e.: reference interview)</li><li>○ Training Needs Analysis</li></ul></li><li>• Librarian intervention<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>○ Conducts complex searches on major databases</li><li>○ Research and innovation support including critical appraisal</li><li>○ Information technology network support</li><li>○ Web and intranet development</li></ul></li><li>• Collection Mx and access<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>○ Collection development, evaluation and management</li><li>○ Copyright management</li><li>○ Electronic licensing / digital collection management</li><li>○ Document delivery</li></ul></li><li>• Peer, clinician and community education<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>○ Undertakes educational / promotional programs as part of the a team with other health professionals</li><li>○ Teaches clinicians at different levels of practice / disciplines the optimal use of information resources</li></ul></li><li>• Planning, maintaining, delivering services</li><li>• Professional development</li></ul>

<p><b>Contexts (Where)</b></p> <p>A list of the range of organisational contexts where health librarians work in Australia:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Hospital settings <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Acute / Tertiary</li> <li>○ Sub-acute</li> <li>○ Teaching hospitals</li> </ul> </li> <li>• Universities and research facilities</li> <li>• Charitable organisations / Non-government organisations</li> <li>• Industrial / commercial enterprises</li> <li>• Mental health services</li> <li>• Community rehabilitation centres</li> </ul>
<p><b>Purposes (Why)</b></p> <p>This section describes the intended range of outcomes of health librarians' services. For example:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Improving educational outcomes</li> <li>• Improving patient care decisions</li> <li>• Supporting and facilitating evidence based practice</li> <li>• Educating clinicians about the range and utilisation of information resources</li> </ul>
<p><b>Approaches (How)</b></p> <p>The section provides examples of the range of service delivery methods used by health librarians functioning independently of other professions or in partnership depending up on the situation. Examples include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Clinic based intervention</li> <li>• Multidisciplinary, interdisciplinary and transdisciplinary teams</li> <li>• Collaboration and consultative partnerships</li> <li>• Intensive programs</li> <li>• Use of natural contexts (e.g.: ward based service delivery)</li> <li>• Training clinicians to independent information access and use</li> </ul>

Table 1: Example of a suggested scope of practice for health librarians in Australia

### 3. COMPETENCIES

Instead of a rigid and narrow list of work tasks /activities, that may potentially restrict opportunities for individuals and the profession alike, competencies could determine the standard of staff development, advanced and extended practice. The level of detail can be determined locally to meet local needs but the competencies still provide a structure around determining work levels and work performance because they are linked to the HLA competencies for health librarians.

A set of ALIA endorsed competencies for all librarians could be used as a basis for entry, revalidation and re-entry to the profession. ALIA-HLA could build upon generic entry level professional competencies and would document the specialist tasks and skills required of health librarians thus recognising an advanced scope of practice. For health librarians such an approach to professional regulation, using the auspice of the professional body in the absence of legislation, would be the same as for those health professions who are not regulated by the Australian Health Practitioner Regulation

Agency. For example major health professional peak bodies such as Speech Pathology Australia and the Australian Association of Social Workers are already moving in this direction.

<b>Scope of practice</b>	<b>Competency level</b>
Scope of practice	Entry level competency standards, applicable to all librarians
Advanced Scope of practice – sector / individual specific	Health specific competencies Public library specific competencies Academic library specific competencies
Extended Scope of practice	Highly developed health / individual specific competencies

Table 2: Linkage between Scope of practice and Competency

Similarly ALIA could develop or endorse competencies for other domains of advanced practice such as public, law and academic librarianship. General professional membership of ALIA could be contingent upon continuing professional development as a mechanism to mitigate the risk of unskilled professionals, and advanced / extended scopes of practice could be managed through a credentialing scheme. The Medical Library Association (MLA) successfully operates such a scheme, the Academy of Health Information Professionals [13].

The current MLA competencies [14] include a broad range of tasks grouped under the headings:

- Understand the health sciences and health care environment and the policies, issues, and trends that impact that environment
- Know and understand the application of leadership, finance, communication, and management theory and techniques
- Understand the principles and practices related to providing information services to meet users' needs
- Have the ability to manage health information resources in a broad range of formats
- Understand and use technology and systems to manage all forms of information
- Understand curricular design and instruction and have the ability to teach ways to access, organize, and use information
- Understand scientific research methods and have the ability to critically examine and filter research literature from many related disciplines

It is proposed that a set of generic competencies for librarians in Australia at the level of entry to the profession is developed. It is unrealistic to expect an entry level librarian to be competent in all areas without access to a senior / experienced librarian. This is critical in isolated / sole practitioner situations. At any time an entry level librarian in Australia must be able to demonstrate competence in any of the following domains of suggested core practice:

1. Client assessment
2. Librarian intervention
3. Collection Mx and access
4. Peer, clinician and community education
5. Planning, maintaining, delivering services

## 6. Professional development

Each domain is a broad area of professional activity. They are not sequentially ordered and do not imply any stages or isolated steps in the process of practice. The practice of the profession is multidimensional and the numbering of the domains is for reference only.

Within each domain are a series of elements that describe more specific activities. Performance Criteria will need to be adopted in order to be able to infer whether the elements of competency are being carried out to an acceptable standard. Local cues illustrate the knowledge base, practical considerations, actions, attitudes, and some contextual features that are required as evidence of achievement in particular performance criteria. Table 3 illustrates how a competency could be expanded to meet local circumstances.

Competency Domain	3. Collection Management and access
Element	3.1 Collection development, evaluation and management
Performance criteria	Collection is developed to meet client needs.
Cue (local workplace)	Collection development policy current, evidence of using standard selection tools, evaluation based on suitable qualitative / quantitative methods etc.

Table 3: Example of a Competency Based Standard showing components down to local cue level.

Related professions such as health informatics are already working on this issue on Australia [15] and some writers [16] have plotted the current significant overlap between health librarians and other health information professionals. Emerging trends such as interdisciplinary education for the health professions increasingly stipulate the generic knowledge, skills and behaviours of the future workforce with respect to common areas of work such as communication, teamwork, ethical practice, non clinical practice.

## 4. BARRIERS AND RISKS

The barriers to the adoption of the scheme suggested above include:

- Regulation / legislation (participation would be voluntary through ALIA)
- Professional culture (high level of vocation among librarians and low participation rates in current CPD schemes)
- Need for employer engagement to realise the scheme
- Financial (no immediate financial advantage to individuals to participate)
- Lack of competencies
- Lack of support from ALIA
- Competition from other related professions.

The risks to the profession of not responding to the challenges described above could be a matter of survival. Evidence of this risk includes examples such the reclassification of professional positions into administrative positions; encroachment in domains of competence by other professionals because the

areas of work have not been recognised as being part of our scope of practice / area of competence; and a lack of professional development / research activity.

## 5. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The lack of a scope of practice and related competency based standards distinguishes health librarians from other professional groups in health care. The continuation of this situation has the potential to further erode the status of the profession. To maximise the opportunities presented by emerging technologies, role changes and developments such as National eHealth Strategy initiatives involving the integration of decision-support clinical knowledge resources with the electronic health records and the creation of a national health knowledge portal, Australian health librarians need to pursue the following:

- ALIA as the peak professional body in Australia endorse, update and regulate a scope of practice and competency based standards as the benchmark for entry to and revalidation within the profession.
- ALIA to make professional membership contingent upon skills acquisition and maintenance rather than financial obligation.
- ALIA to develop a credentialing system, not a (passive) voluntary CPD scheme to ensure advanced practice. This could be modelled on the MLA AHIP scheme.
- ALIA to maintain a public register of credentialed (health) librarians.

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