

Information needs of family physicians in Nigeria

To the editor: Family Medicine in Nigeria is a young academic discipline, which was established in 1980 as one of the 14 academic disciplines at the inception of the National Postgraduate Medical College of Nigeria. The prerequisite skills, scope and distinctiveness of family physicians in Nigeria is not too different from what obtains in other parts of the world. Since the communication of medical information is a crucial factor in the delivery of high-quality medical care, a health information service forms an integral part of national health systems. During the past several years, a number of medical researchers have expressed apprehension about gaps in physicians' knowledge of current research in clinical medicine. The focus of concern has been the physicians' timely access to credible sources of information.^{1,2,3}

How do physicians fill gaps in their medical knowledge? What sources of information do physicians employ to answer questions generated by the problematic situations they encounter in clinical practice? Do practicing physicians usually get answers from medical literature, from colleagues, or from yet other sources? While often asked and researched, these questions remain a matter of paramount importance. It is a matter that concerns the health of patients and the public, the professional credibility and status of physicians, and the organisation of institutions and services for training and providing information to physicians.

There is a dearth of information on the information needs and information-seeking behaviour of family physicians in Nigeria and in many other developing countries. As family physicians, the scope and breadth of the services they provide make it imperative to seek and update their knowledge of the management of the varied clinical conditions presented to them daily. It has been established that information-seeking behaviour varies from one area of specialisation to the other.⁴

The purpose of this study therefore is to define the information needs and information-seeking behaviour of family physicians in Nigeria. This will enable an evaluation of whether these information needs are being met or not. A structured, self-administered questionnaire that had been pre-tested and validated was distributed to all the 125 family physicians at the 25th anniversary of the Faculty of Family Medicine in Nigeria. A total of 94 of the 125 questionnaires were completed (75.2%) and analysed for this study. Of the respondents, 60 (63.8%) were specialist family physicians, 57 (60.6%) worked in government specialist teaching hospitals, while 17 (18.1%) worked in private hospitals. The information needs were: new developments in area of specialisation (87.3%); drug information (74.2%); government regulations on health care (70.2%); and routine patient care (65.9%). The information sources used most frequently were: medical textbooks (85.0%); consultation with colleagues (85.0%); internet medical databases (80.9%); and journals (75.4%). Most of the family medicine trainees 20 (58.8%) preferred to seek information first from their colleagues, while the majority of the family physicians 31 (51.7%) would first seek information from internet medical databases. Only 29.8% of the respondents were satisfied with the library services provided to meet their information needs.

In conclusion, family physicians have their peculiar information needs and information-seeking behaviour. The availability of current medical textbooks and easy access to online medical databases will contribute

Table I: Information needs and sources used by respondents

Types of information needs	Order of preference (score, %)
(a) New developments in family medicine	410 (87.3%)
(b) Drug information	349 (74.2%)
(c) Govt regulations, laws relating to health care	330 (70.2%)
(d) Routine patient care	310 (65.9%)
(e) Practice organisation and management	235 (50.0%)
(f) Disease-specific information	205 (43.7%)
(g) New medical equipment	150 (31.9%)
Types of information sources used	Order of preferences (score, %)
Colleagues	400 (85.0%)
Medical textbooks	400 (85.0%)
Internet medical databases	380 (80.9%)
Printed journals	350 (74.5%)
Courses and conferences	268 (57.1%)
Library reference service	220 (46.8%)
• Personal/private collections	181 (38.3%)
• Pharmaceutical representatives	130 (27.7%)
CD-Rom	5 (1.1%)

immensely to the satisfaction of the information needs of this group of doctors. Medical colleagues as a source of medical information is an area that requires further evaluation. Medical librarians as information managers need to rise to the challenges of meeting the information needs of these front-line doctors in the overall interest of the community and the nation at large.

Acknowledgments

The authors wish to extend thanks to all family physicians who took time to participate in this study.

^a **Shabi OM**, MBChB, FNCGP

^b **Kuteyi EA**, MBBS, FNCGP

^a **Odewale MA**, MBBS, FNCGP

^c **Shabi IN**, BSc, MLIS

^a Department of Family Medicine, LAUTECH Teaching Hospital, Osogbo, Osun State, Nigeria

^b Department of Community Medicine, Obafemi Awolowo University, Ile-Ife, Osun State, Nigeria

^c Cataloguing Unit, Hezekiah Oluwasanmi Library, Obafemi Awolowo University, Ile-Ife, Osun State, Nigeria

Correspondence to: Dr OM Shabi, e-mail: iwokshabi@yahoo.com

References

1. Darosa D, Mast TA, Dawson-Saunders B, Mazur J. A study of the information-seeking skills of medical students and physician faculty. *J Med Educ* 1983;58(1):45–50.
2. Verhoeven AAH, Boerma EJ, Meyboom-De Jong B. Use of information sources by family physicians: a literature survey. *Bull Med Libr Assoc* 1995;83(1):85–90.
3. Connelly DP, Rich EC, Curley SP, Kelly JT. Knowledge resource preferences of family physicians. *J Fam Pract* 1990;30(3):353–9.
4. Haug JD. Physicians' preferences for information sources: a meta-analytic study. *Bull Med Libr Assoc* 1997;85(3):223–32.