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### **Health Information in Public Libraries in the Netherlands**

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*Medical encyclopaedias have always been very attractive and still are heavily used by public library visitors. The human body is vulnerable; diagnosis by professionals sometimes creates fear and confusion. People are responsible for their own lives, but they need information and knowledge to take that responsibility. Reliable information, background information is part of a process of orientation which can be helpful in self-medication, in supporting the healing process, or in giving direction to talks with medical staff and family members.*

*In a society in which costs for medicine and health care increase for various reasons, it is important that only those enter the health care system who really need it and can be cured, keeping a balance between reasonable health care for all and cost effective measures. One way is to spend more and more in the health care system itself, another way is to support people to take care of their own health, by providing information, easy access to self help collections and supportive services.*

*What role can libraries play in relation to health care and informed citizens and patients?*

#### **Informed citizens and patients**

Public libraries in the Netherlands noticed that at least 55% of people with questions on health and self-help visited the public library and hoped to find answers there. A number of libraries has responded to this clear need for health information and set up Health Information Points.

In 1998 a national pilot project started with ten public libraries who pioneered with various forms of information services. The change of focus in the medical sector from overregulation of services to a more patient-driven and demand-based health care had given patients a stronger position in medical treatment and decision taking. The Dutch Act on Medical Treatment also gives children a right to give their views (under 12 years of ages) have a say (Co-decision with parents: 12-16 years of age; and take decisions (16 years of age and older). Part of this new paradigm is to inform people about their rights as patients and their right to information about their health, diagnosis and proposed treatment. Patients have become more empowered and require better information services. Citizens in general need to have access to social and community information in order to orientate themselves with health questions. Public libraries can provide such basic information and support specialised health services.

#### **Pilot project**

The pilot public libraries proved the importance of a focussed information service for health questions. On the level of policy making, the primary health information service is related to policies for informed citizens, youth care, policies for integrating handicapped and the immigrants in society, for care for the elderly, local social policies and mental health care provisions.

On the national level, the Library Association, NPLA, contacted the national players in the field of health care and arranged training and study of various health information systems. Materials, such as leaflets and brochures, CD-ROMs and databases were checked for practical use in libraries and for meeting the needs of users. Librarians tested and commented to improve these materials. A number of contacts were made with organisations of patients and with health help lines.

Provincial library centres (PBC's) contacted regional health organisations and collected practical information in databases and supported local library projects.

On the local level, librarians took contact with local public health services, organisations and doctors. They mapped the information which was available and the services provided by all these institutions. A number of organisations immediately took advantage of the contact and proposed the library to regularly update the folders and brochures. Others were willing to arrange for office hours on special questions, e.g. diet or health care equipment, yet others were asked by the library to give a series of lectures or to provide an exhibition.

Public libraries have now established structural contacts of cooperation with these local health care providers. These organisations appreciate the general information service provided by the public library. In this way they themselves can concentrate on more specialised questions. Librarians, the staff of the Health Information Point, know the health care network and can give better references in case of specialised topics.

### **What is a Health Information Point?**

In a Health Information Point all information and materials which are available in the library are concentrated physically and presented in an attractive way. The collection includes traditional materials such as encyclopaedias, books, magazines and brochures. It also includes new media as CD-ROM's and selected digital sources on the internet. People can sit and study anonymously. They can also ask for help: to find information, to find answers or to find a reliable address for advice. The librarians in the front office have had training in health databases searching; they know medical jargon and the health care network. Innovative and important is the cooperation with the local/regional health institutions. In order to inform various groups of the general public about old and new health-related topics, the libraries have set up a series of lectures and structured regular exhibitions. In the Dutch system, organisations are willing to pay to reach their target groups through the library facilities. They can book for giving a lecture, keep office hours or an exhibition in the library.

The public library of Zoetermeer ([www.bibliotheek-zoetermeer.nl](http://www.bibliotheek-zoetermeer.nl): search in frame at left for item Gezondheid) has been the leading example in making such organisation feasible. The extra efforts and costs of the library (space, facilities, privacy rooms, staff training) are compensated by income from these organisations and a stronger community profile of the public library.

To mention just another example: recently, a Health Information Infopoint has been opened in Ommoord, a branch library of the Rotterdam Municipal library. As many users increasingly asked for various types of information related to health care, the library decided to set up the Info-Point. It arranged an information market in the neighbourhood centre in which the library is located. And the Info Point was opened by a popular author/medical doctor. A number of computers is available with selected websites about health problems and questions. Posters and leaflets are other means of providing information. Local institutions will also give lectures, held office hours and present exhibitions in the library. This will be a direct way to reach out to target groups. ([www.bibliotheek.rotterdam.nl](http://www.bibliotheek.rotterdam.nl))

### **Regional cooperation and back office**

In the region of eastern Gelderland, a number of libraries have built up their Health Info Points, in regional cooperation. Supported by the Provincial Library Centre, Biblioservice Gelderland, they developed a scenario for setting up the Health Info Point, with a distinction between smaller and larger libraries. All are linked and give input to the regional address database ([www.zorgwijzer.nl](http://www.zorgwijzer.nl)). All have a physically concentrated Health Information Point and staff trained by provincial specialists and a medical doctor. The four larger libraries (Duiven, Doetinchem, Winterswijk and Zutphen) have domain specialists. Biblioservice organised the provincial back office consisting of domain specialists and a back office desk, and supports the local front offices in various ways. One of them is the development of an interactive virtual health desk ([www.gezondheidsloket.nl](http://www.gezondheidsloket.nl)). The content of this website and health database consists of various links and web addresses and ways to search health information. Both normal speech and Latin names are used as key words to make searches for diseases and treatment easier. Local libraries have a button on their homepage, so users can easily get access, and also ask questions. Queries are answered within two working days. Domain specialists in the provincial back office try to answer these questions themselves or they get the information from the health specialists in their network. This is an advanced service compared to Zoetermeer or Heerlen, which in such cases are limited to mere reference to other organisations. This advanced service is possible because of its scale, regional, and through provincial cooperation between the library and the health sector. In Eastern Gelderland, front and back office workers work according to protocols, to guarantee the quality and equal processing of questions and queries. The regional domain specialists maintain the contacts with the health organisations and have developed specialisms, e.g. relations to the hospitals or anthroposophist health treatment. They also provide newsletters to all involved and publish an overview of regional activities. Furthermore, they cooperate in filling an internet based database ('De GIDS' - The Guide -, see below) with local addresses of medical doctors, hospitals, health organisations, etc. This database will be used as the source from which a regional digital Health Information Point may be uploaded (like [www.gelderszorgportaal.nl](http://www.gelderszorgportaal.nl)).

The provincial back office, situated in Biblioservice, maintains contacts with regional and national health services, develops the virtual desk and regional training. It provides advice on selection of materials and produces physical and virtual information packages/dossiers on current health issues, which can also be used for lectures and exhibitions. The frequently asked questions of users are analysed and made accessible for new users.

The success of the Health Information Points can be illustrated by the positive reactions of users. Some of them help the librarians in finding new information, tips and materials.

## National support

Based on the innovative pilot project, NPLA has published a handbook on setting up Health information services in libraries. Librarians can take a course in Health Information, with is set up in cooperation between NPLA and national health institutes.

The Library branch policy executed by NPLA is focussing on elaborating the concept of the broad and virtual library, especially by means of the library portal [www.bibliotheek.nl](http://www.bibliotheek.nl) and related services. The library portal offers the possibility to search for all kinds of media held by the public libraries and their databases, with the help of keywords and associative browsing (Application Aquabrowser).

A number of databases has been bought in license, including consumer information, national bibliographic data and search facilities. Public libraries as members of NPLA have agreed to pay extra for this basic digital information package, which can be offered to users in the libraries.

A special application called de G!ds, (The Guide), helps to collect local address information, including addresses of health services in a digital format, which can easily be used for all kinds of information services.

Another practise example is Delftzijl (<http://www.bibliotheekgids.nl/school.html?filiaal=25>) where the library provides the community information service and announces special consultations hours of a new social and health service for children and young people.

As part of Bibliotheek.nl, a virtual reference service, called [Al@din](mailto:al@din) is active since 2003 (<http://aladin.bibliotheek.nl>, but also on [www.gezondheidsloket.nl](http://www.gezondheidsloket.nl)). It allows anyone to ask questions online, which will be answered by teams of libraries who have signed a service contract. The roll out of the service is via the provincial library centres in every province. Teams of specialists are created around various subjects across the country, and include a team on Health matters. Therefore, Bibliotheek.nl has included the interactive virtual health desk of Biblioservice as a national digital service and makes use of the various local and regional projects as described above. This is possible because it makes use of the same 'G!ds' applications. In this way, local and regional initiatives and pilots are transformed into national service with support of the NPLA and its national ICT tasks. The National Library and the University of Amsterdam are partners for more specialised queries.

Campaigning has resulted in about 3000 visits a day to the al@din service and 900 questions a day! 78% of young people know [Al@din](mailto:al@din) and an increasing number is also familiar with the library portal.

## Special target groups

Children and young people form in many ways special target groups of public libraries. Reading, literacy, cultural exploration and media education are key words of various services. The general human right of access to information also applies to children and young people. The *UN Convention on the Rights of Child* explicitly mentions this right of access to information in article 17, and more explicitly on health information in article 26.

Therefore, it is most appropriate that public libraries, as public services, have a broad range of sources on health matters. These sources contain, first of all, factual information, all types of sources ranging from brochures to encyclopaedias and digital sources. Short courses on healthy life, lectures on diseases and communities of patients are other services organised by libraries. As librarians know, fiction can be very helpful in understanding the psychological side of dealing with health and diseases. This form of bibliotherapy is not very explicitly promoted (yet), but well known and sometimes used by medical doctors, nurses or good friends, and good librarians.

Some libraries have a special approach to children's questions and transformed the library into a children's information centre, where children are intensely participating. ([www.haarlem.nl](http://www.haarlem.nl))

A large number of libraries has special information collections for young people, focusing on many questions they may have in the field of housing, study, work, travel, sex, drugs or health in general. Special promotion is given to safe (sex) behaviour when travelling and meeting other cultures. A number of libraries with a dedicated task for information about Europe and for young people, participates in the network of youth information services, called Go Europe!

<http://www.go-europe.nl/smartsite.htm?id=8035>

It gives direct information on health and travel, and a direct reference to the European website: [http://europa.eu.int/abc/travel/healthy/index\\_nl.htm](http://europa.eu.int/abc/travel/healthy/index_nl.htm), including information on health risks etc.

Public libraries have understood their role in providing access to information. Sometimes this can be a question of life and death. We only have to think of epidemics like HIV/Aids, birds flu etc.

Libraries know they have to partner with other and specialised organisations, in order to supply a fully fledged service. This is what they are working on, worldwide. A healthy development for all!