

# Job-shadowing Swiss health librarians observing experienced search specialists and information skills trainers in London

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### Abstract

*As librarians of the Social & Preventive Medicine Library in Bern, we help researchers perform systematic literature searches and teach students to use medical databases. We developed our skills mainly “on the job”, and we wondered how other health librarians in Europe were trained to become experts in searching. We had a great opportunity to “job shadow” specialists in this area of library service during a 5-day-internship at the Royal Free Hospital Medical Library in London, Great Britain.*

**Key words:** staff mobility for training, librarians, Erasmus, job-shadowing, professional development.

### Introduction

Over the last few years, the Institute of Social & Preventive Medicine of the Bern University has grown considerably and now employs over 140 researchers who receive national and international grants and are involved in many research projects. As health librarians for the Institute, we support students and other researchers to develop systematic search strategies and we train them to use databases. We had “grown with the job” to fill these needs, but had no formal credentials for teaching in these areas. Everything we know, we have learned on the job, and at different short workshops on database searching. Because we had never been tutored or supervised by experienced searchers or trainers, we wanted to find out how to assess our performance. Were we doing these jobs well? We definitely needed professional exchange with other librarians!

In 2013, we met Betsy Anagnostelis at the Swiss “Meet & Greet” Day for Medical Librarians. She had joined us from London to conduct a workshop on PubMed, and mentioned that a whole team at the Royal Free Hospital Medical Library, UCL Library Services (hereafter called “Royal Free”) was dedicated to performing systematic searches for hospital employees and researchers. The team also taught medical students and fellow librarians to use the most

important medical databases efficiently. We immediately started to think about how we could learn from these more experienced colleagues.

### From idea to realization

In spring of 2014, we told our Director at ISPM that we wanted to visit the Royal Free team and he gave us permission to take a week’s leave to do so. We decided our visit would take place in September, which we hoped would give us enough time to find funding for our trip. We quickly applied for the Staff Mobility for Training (STT) programme, an option provided by the Swiss-European Mobility Programme (ERASMUS): “Staff mobility enables academic and non-academic employees (administration, teaching, technical support) to enjoy short stays at a European partner university. The objective of this kind of stay is to find out via job-shadowing, workshops and the like – arranged at the partner university – about alternative solutions, in terms of organization, content and processes, that may help a person in their own area of work. It is supposed to be an opportunity for people to acquire ideas and aptitudes through an exchange of experiences and good practice and thereby develop as professionals and practitioners” (1).

Our application was accepted and approved within a few days, with confirmation that all our costs would be

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covered. We just needed to submit a few documents before and after our stay: a training programme, a declaration of obligation, a letter of confirmation from the host institution, and a final report.

Once we secured funding, we received final approval from both our Directors (Institute of Social & Preventive Medicine and University Library) and, less than two weeks after we first had the idea, everything came together:

- hosting institution
- funding
- employer's approval

We booked flights right away, and a hotel near the Royal Free Hospital, and by end of June, 2014, our plans were complete. After the summer holidays we started writing down our “wish list” of all the topics we hoped to discuss with the Royal Free search specialists. We also chose specific search problems to share with Royal Free, and brought our latest PowerPoint presentation about systematic searching. Finally September 7th arrived, and we couldn't wait to start our adventure (*Figure 1*).



**Figure 1.** *The Royal Free Hospital and UCL Medical School.*

**The week programme**

On Monday morning, September 8, Betsy Anagnostelis welcomed us to the Royal Free, where we received a library tour and were introduced to the staff. The library is perfectly located between the hospital wing and the UCL (University College London) Medical School. Betsy organized events and tours for us, throughout the week. She also gave us enough time to discuss, process, and integrate all the information we

were given while we were there. We were also free to put together our own programme for the week.

Our working hours were not defined (except for training sessions at the Biomedical and Health Information Summer School). We planned the start and end of our days ourselves, which worked very well. Some days, we stayed at the Royal Free until 9:30 pm; other days we finished by 4 pm. We thus had the opportunity to explore beautiful Hampstead (the area where we stayed) with its pleasant Heath (forest), and also to see downtown London, where we visited four other libraries and, of course, the main tourist attractions.

**Job-shadowing: observing our colleagues at work**

We were given computer workspaces with guest accounts, from which we accessed online resources. There were three librarians on the team that performed literature searches and taught skills: Angela Young (Information Skills Trainer), Ruth Muscat (Knowledge Resources Librarian) and Sophie Pattison (Acting Clinical Support Librarian). Each had their own specialty field, and we were happy to profit from their advice. While we were “shadowing”, we could ask them questions about how they do things and why they do them that way (*Figure 2*).



**Figure 2.** *Together with colleagues of the Royal Free team.*

It was very useful to learn about an unfamiliar library service: the Clinical Effectiveness Enquiry Service (CEES) is a free literature search service for members of the hospital medical staff who seek evidence in support of patient care, guidelines, or

research. Staff members complete an online form themselves, or with the help of a member of the CEES team. The CEES assists hospital staff in clinical decision-making, but is not intended for use in complex searches for systematic reviews.

We also followed a session of the UCL-wide Biomedical and Health Information Summer School workshop on literature searching for systematic reviews. This training was held for health librarians, to help them perform comprehensive searches in multiple databases. The teachers focused on real-world examples, and the course was very interactive. We were glad to see that the training material we had developed met the quality standards.

In the workshop we were able to see one way of developing librarians' search skills. We were told that, as in Switzerland, literature search skills in medical databases were not an integral part of the Library School curriculum. It's mainly on-the-job training and courses. The Royal Free however took another approach: more experienced staff tutored new searchers and gave them regular support and feedback (2).

Betsy Anagnostelis was a valuable source for all kinds of information, including the pros and cons of different medical databases and their respective platforms, the need for more training, and information on document delivery. Although her schedule as Head of the Royal Free Hospital Medical Library and other UCL health libraries kept her very busy, she always found time to stop by our desk and ask if we needed anything, or if she could help in any way.

A special highlight was our visit to the British

Medical Association (BMA) Library (Figure 3). It is reserved for the use of BMA members, so we needed to get a visitor's pass and go through security gates. After search specialist Helen Elwell guided us through the whole building, she showed us how she performed literature searches for BMA members, what she requested from them in advance and which platforms and filters she used. We discussed some specific search problems, and she gave us valuable advice. We interviewed her, as we interviewed all the librarians we met.

Afterwards we visited the very impressive premises of the Royal Society of Medicine Library, where we could also collect information about their literature search services (Figure 4).



**Figure 4.** Beautiful silent study reading room at the RSM Library.

Last, but not least, we visited the British Library and the Royal College of Nursing Library on our own. We enjoyed it, even though we did not have the opportunity to meet with a training or search team member. We just marvelled at the greatness of the British Library, and liked the beautifully presented Nursing Library, and the Heritage Centre with its nice little café and the interesting exhibition.

### Self-reflection

How did our search services and workshops compare to those offered by our London colleagues? *Systematic searching:* We are less experienced than our colleagues, but, essentially, our way of building search strategies is the same. We were motivated to continue along these lines, and to refine our search skills even more by discussing strategies together. Evidently, our decision to introduce call-in sessions



**Figure 3.** The BMA building.

was correct, since, in the three London medical libraries we visited, one-to-one teaching is very appreciated by customers.

*Teaching:* Our colleagues do a lot of teaching via online courses and blogs; that's something we have not started doing yet, and we may try that out. We learned that we are just as proficient at face-to-face teaching as our colleagues.

*Topics covered:* A lot of the learning content we provide is similar to that offered by the Royal Free (EBM, PICO system, structuring of searches in concepts, etc.), but Royal Free also gives workshops on critical appraisal and use of reference management software. Other specialists at the University of Bern cover these topics.

### Conclusions

The medical field (hospitals and research institutions) has urgent need for professionals who can perform systematic literature searches, teach courses and offer one-to-one training to the medical audience (students, clinicians and researchers).

Mentoring programmes designed to deepen search skills should supplement courses on medical databases, so that more experienced searchers and teachers can bring less experienced librarians up to speed. Here in Switzerland, we should establish a

circle of medical librarians involved in systematic searching, so we can discuss complex search strategies and share ideas and skills.

Providing travel grants for staff that wish to train at other facilities is money well spent. Observing other professionals in their home environment is a great way to encourage reflection on our own processes, to gain new skills, and to implement new knowledge and expertise in the workplace.

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