Public libraries help patients access information, books, technology and programs to support health literacy

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Public libraries across Nova Scotia are helping people to improve their own well-being.

Many library services, all of which are free, help mitigate the negative effects of the social determinants of health. According to the World Health Organization, a person’s ability to find, read and understand information has the greatest impact on their health; those with less ability are less healthy.1

Recommended the library to your patients means they don’t have to search for information alone. Library staff have the time to assist people with finding health information at the reading and in the format they need. They will also direct people to, and prioritize, information from the Nova Scotia Health Authority; for example, NSHA Central Zone Patient Pamphlets are available in the Halifax Public Libraries’ online catalogue.

Libraries also make Internet access freely available and staff can assist with online searches. At many libraries, staff can also perform database searches, which offer better quality health information than a general Google search will yield. With public library service, poverty and education levels don’t have to be reasons people can’t find the information they need to manage their health.

Nova Scotia’s public libraries also offer health-related activities, such as the flu vaccination clinic at the Truro Library, encouraging visitors to pick vegetables from the library garden in Guysborough and various public information sessions.

Living in rural Nova Scotia need not be a barrier either. There are 79 library locations across the province, many in smaller communities such as Sherbrooke, Canso and Mulgrave, which offer very modern facilities.

Since one in three Nova Scotians uses a public library, it makes sense for Public Health to capitalize on library infrastructure to share health information with the public. New health-related collections have been added to every public library system in the province, on topics including breast cancer, Alzheimer’s, breastfeeding and mental health. The purchase of these books is funded by special grants and through partnerships with stakeholder organizations.

The most recent collection, which focuses on the psychosocial aspect of cancer, was developed through work with Cancer Care Nova Scotia (CCNS). Six books cover topics including sexual health changes, talking with children about a parent’s illness, survivorship, healthy eating and spiritual well-being.

“A diagnosis of cancer is life-altering for the patient, their family and friends,” said Meg McCallum, provincial manager of education and patient navigation at CCNS. “Our partnership with the public libraries means all Nova Scotians have easy access to information that can help them manage their cancer journey.”

Last year, more than 263,000 people attended programs at libraries. Endorsing services offered by libraries could be an effective and low-cost means to encourage patient activation. Consider prescribing a library visit.

References: