Perspectives of a health information professional

A personal reflection on the CILIP 2023 Conference

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I last attended a CILIP Conference in 2016 at the Brighton Dome. Seven years later, I went to Birmingham with a sense of trepidation and curiosity. This was entirely due to my total immersion in the health sector. I work for NHS England as part of the Knowledge for Healthcare national team and was until recently a member of CILIP's Health Libraries Group (HLG) committee. Hence my focus on health.

Since joining the UKeiG committee, I was curious to find out more about other parts of the profession. Were their challenges similar to those faced by the health library sector or were they different? Would my horizons be broadened by the presentations and networking opportunities on offer?

Two of the foci of UKeiG are emerging technology and using technology to better understand information. The former includes artificial intelligence and natural language processing, the latter data management and data visualisation. These topics are also a major part of my work with NHS England.

I was struck by the emphasis on emerging technology at the conference. Rebecka Isaksson's keynote on using AI-powered knowledge to drive business value showed that artificial intelligence is unlikely to replace the information professional. Instead, when allied with human intelligence, i.e. you or me, it can reduce the margin for error in decision making. Harnessing AI, we can put knowledge into context. AI will remove the drudgery in our jobs and will enable us to be more engaged in a knowledge-centric culture. The focus is about creating, enhancing, retrieving, analysing and optimising knowledge.

This plays well with our role as NHS England to encourage health information and knowledge specialists to become the human bridge between technology and those who need to use it, to help them access and mobilise, biomedical knowledge.

The AI and data panel discussed the fact that artificial intelligence is a strategic priority for many NHS Trusts but rarely explicitly mentioned in library strategies. If we think about it, we are already using AI tools. Think about searching Google or chatbot services with your utility providers or banks. More recently, generative AI has made an impact with ChatGPT and similar products such as Microsoft Copilot. While there are issues, such as hallucination, biases, copyright and privacy, the speed of iteration may address these issues in coming

years. Currently it's generating content from the public web, and we know there is a lot of content hidden behind paywalls and restricted access.

Perhaps the information professional's role is one of data stewardship - making sure people have the skills to use AI tools ethically and responsibly, having oversight or management of data and knowledge assets to give users the confidence in AI generated content.

I was interested in Sam Thomas's practical use of ChatGPT for overcoming mental blocks when he's drafting emails, reports or business cases. At University Hospitals Dorset, he treats AI as a useful friend; *listen to its advice, but don't always use it!* Sam sees generative AI providing simple explanations for complex topics, generating search terms, gaining new insights from data, and prompting ideas. As the demand for knowledge services increases as clinical staff have less time to find and synthesise the evidence for themselves, using generative AI may become that 'useful friend' to help manage the workload.

While we're still getting to grips with AI in NHS health libraries; what it means for us as a profession but also how to make best use of it in our work and support others in its use it in theirs, I was struck by Masud Khokar's (University of Leeds) assertion that we've missed the bus as far as influencing the direction of travel for artificial intelligence. Masud feels that the information age will shift to the imagination age and that it is critical that libraries should take ownership of the gaps: the knowledge gap; the digital gap; and the innovation gap.

The knowledge gap is about identifying misinformation, the biases and lack of diversity in datasets, highlighting privacy concerns and helping people understand how AI works. Digital literacy is about having the skills needed to be able to understand algorithms and their limitations, copyright, issues around digital inclusion, and being creative in ways which are sensitive to diverse cultures. Our role in addressing the innovation gap is about the use of trusted knowledge, ethical standards, supporting makerspaces and reclaiming ownership of data and the digital space. This was supported by the comments of Nick Woolley (Sheffield Hallam University) in his talk about generative AI in the university sector. He also sees libraries taking a prominent role in data stewardship and digital literacies.

Masud stated that our instinct is to gravitate towards the familiar, to opinions that support our already held beliefs. Given the pace of change in the health sector, especially with the skills needed for the digital future outlined in the Topol Review, it is important that knowledge and information specialists keep their minds open to the potential of digital technologies to transform the NHS and patient care.

From listening to some of the many excellent speakers at the conference, I feel the challenges are similar. Aside from the impact of emerging technologies on libraries, particularly in the commercial and academic sectors, many of the issues resonated with me, from the campaign to change e-book publishing models, the importance of resilience and wellbeing, making libraries more sustainable, attracting, and retaining staff (including the use of apprenticeships) and the importance of evidence-based practice.

My horizons have been broadened, simply by talking to library and information colleagues during the breaks. I gained a small understanding of the issues facing professionals in other sectors, and although they seemed familiar, there were of course nuances. Jo Walley's excellent session on developing yourself as a leader introduced me to imposter syndrome, the inability to appreciate your success is down to your own efforts or skill. I do sometimes feel this way, but attending the conference showed me that imposter syndrome is common. It's not something that ever really goes away, but Jo recommends recognising it and making a conscious effort to put it in the background, to not give it undue focus. Having conversations with people outside my sector, indeed in other professions, has helped boost my own confidence and I can't think of a better way of meeting people than attending conference. UKeiG offers two bursaries every year. Keep an eye out for 2026!