

# Information-seeking practices of public health professionals

Kristine M. Newman, RN, CRN(C), PhD  
School of Nursing, Faculty of Health  
Sciences  
McMaster University  
1280 Main Street West, Hamilton, ON,  
Canada, L8S 4K1  
+1(905) 525-9140 ext 21485  
newmana@mcmaster.ca

Maureen Dobbins RN, PhD  
School of Nursing, Faculty of Health  
Sciences  
McMaster University  
1280 Main Street West, Hamilton, ON,  
Canada, L8S 4K1  
+1(905) 525-9140 ext 22481  
dobbinsm@mcmaster.ca

Donna Ciliska, RN, PhD  
School of Nursing, Faculty of Health  
Sciences  
McMaster University  
1280 Main Street West, Hamilton, ON,  
Canada, L8S 4K1  
+1(905) 525-9140 ext 22529  
ciliska@mcmaster.ca

Jennifer Yost RN, PhD  
School of Nursing, Faculty of Health  
Sciences  
McMaster University  
1280 Main Street West, Hamilton, ON,  
Canada, L8S 4K1  
+1(905) 525-9140 ext 21927  
jyost@mcmaster.ca

## ABSTRACT

Information-seeking is an important activity undertaken by public health professionals during their work tasks. There is a lack of research examining public health professionals' individual and collaborative information-seeking behaviors. An understanding of information-seeking behavior activities will help to inform strategies to promote the use of evidence-informed resources.

## Categories and Subject Descriptors

H.3.3 Information search and retrieval

## General Terms

Human Factors

## Keywords

Collaborative, individual, Information-seeking behaviours, survey, public health professionals

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Public health is diverse and includes many different types of professionals such as communicable disease specialists and epidemiologists, public health clinicians, health officers, public health nurses, and health policy makers (Revere et al., 2007). Often interdisciplinary teams work together in the public health sector (Canadian Public Health Association, 1996). Due to the

diversity in the work roles of public health professionals it is important to understand their information needs and behaviors. Leckie, Pettigrew, and Sylvain (1996) suggest that work roles and tasks are thought to be the prime motivators for seeking information as a professional. Work tasks prompt information needs, which in turn, stimulate the information-seeking process (Leckie et al., 1996).

## 2. INFORMATION-SEEKING BEHAVIOR

Information-seeking behaviors include a variety of behaviors motivated by the recognition of missing information, or information needs (Case, 2007). An information need requires the individual to seek out resources and problem-solve to complete the task. An individual can seek information independently (i.e. searches sources such as published journals) or through a collaborative means (i.e. seeks channels such as colleagues) by assisting each other to find information resources. Collaborative information-seeking behaviours involves the information-seeking and retrieval process activities of human beings interacting with other individuals to access information sources to solve problems related to work tasks in their workplace context (Hansen & Jarvelin, 2005). Collaborative information-seeking seems intuitive in the workplace context especially when an individual requires assistance with their own information needs.

## 3. PUBLIC HEALTH PROFESSIONALS' INFORMATION-SEEKING BEHAVIORS

There are only a few studies that have explored, in general, public health professionals' information-seeking behaviors (Revere et al., 2007; LaPelle, Simpson, Hatheway, Luckmann & Martin, 2004). The literature indicates that colleagues are frequently the first information resource that public health professionals seek when they have information needs (Revere et al., 2007; LaPelle, et al., 2004).

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Only one study has considered collaborative information-seeking behaviors among public health and medical scientists (Blake & Pratt, 2006). Blake and Pratt found that public health and medical scientists actively collaborated during the information synthesis process when they are refining the retrieval, extraction, and analysis phases of their search for information.

Beyond public health collaborative information-seeking has been studied in hospital settings such as an urban surgical intensive care unit and rural emergency department (Reddy & Jansen, 2008). Reddy and Jansen suggest that collaborative information behavior differs from individual information behavior with respect to how individuals interact with each other, the complexity of the information need, and the role of information technology. They found specific triggers for transitioning from individual to collaborative information behaviour in their study, including complexity of information need, fragmented information resources, lack of domain expertise and lack of immediately accessible information (Reddy & Jansen, 2008).

Further research is necessary to understand public health professionals' information-seeking practices both individually and through collaborative methods. The specific triggers for transitioning from individual to collaborative information behavior, needs to be examined in the public health context.

#### 4. FUTURE RESEARCH

It is important that future research: (1) determines the information-seeking behaviors that public health professionals utilize, (2) explores how public health professionals seek information both individually and through collaboration, (3) explores differences in individual and collaborative information-seeking behaviors for public health professionals, (4) explains how factors such as type of public health professional (i.e. role, training, or position in organization) influence their information-seeking behaviors, (5) explore how problem-solving skills affect individual or collaborative information-seeking behaviors and (6) examines context in terms of public health professional's perceptions of how evidence is used in their practice environment. Results could also be compared to other specialties in the health care system. This could help advance the research agenda of collaborative information-seeking behaviors in the healthcare context.

#### 5. CONCLUSIONS

Collaborative information-seeking seems intuitive in the public health context especially when an individual has information needs and would require information sought from resources. Most individuals will ask trusted colleagues for support when they have information needs (Revere et al., 2007; LaPelle, et al., 2004). Public health organizations are usually structured through interdisciplinary teams whom work together. It is important to understand: (1) how public health professionals' collaborate to seek information for their information needs, (2) problem-solve to seek answers to their information needs and (3) how information-seeking behavior activities will help to inform strategies to promote the use of evidence-informed resources.

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