Health Information Ambassador: Partnering with Volunteer Department to Bring the Library to the Patient.

The typical and daily scenario is that patients and families find their way to the Consumer Health Library located in an Outpatient Pavilion where, once they are there, receive excellent support for their health information needs. However, as helpful as the library resources are, the library services were not reaching the patient in their rooms of the hospital facility next door. Born of the work of the Patient/Family Centered Care Team at Sharp Memorial Hospital in San Diego, CA, and in conjunction with an effort to become Planetree Accredited (which has happened), the Health Information Ambassador program was instituted to bring the library to the patient. Patient education is a core value in the patient/family centered care approach to healthcare and the Community Health Library was more than ready to develop and continue this project.

Teaming with the Volunteer Department, the Community Health Library has instituted the Health Information Ambassador program. The volunteers assigned to this service go through the required, regular training that all volunteers do, and then they come to the Consumer Health Library for the specific training for this program. They are oriented to the Library and the procedures for obtaining information requests, and though the volunteers do not do the research, they learn the value and reason that MedlinePlus is such a good resource. The volunteer rounds in the hospital, going first to the Clerk or checking in with the Lead Nurse to see if they have anyone in particular that should be visited. Then they go to the patients' rooms asking if the patient, or family, have any health concerns they would like to more about or further information about their diagnosis. If so, the volunteer fills out the form that was developed for this purpose and then brings it to the Librarian.

Library Staff fill the request and the volunteer returns to the room with the information. If the patient says that they do not have any questions, the volunteer leaves the Librarian's business card with the invitation to call (email, write or text) at any time in the future for health information. This action supports the connection with the patient and family past discharge. If the patient says they already look up information online, the volunteer leaves a MedlinePlus (http://medlineplus.gov) bookmark and encourages them to look there for good health information.

Patients and families overwhelmingly have been enthusiastic about this service. Sharp HealthCare has given this program an organizational award for its support of patient education and patient safety. Sharp is committed and values the empowerment of the
patient to be more involved in their own health care and to partner with their doctor for the best possible results.

The volunteers bring back many stories about the experiences and successes. It is critical to keep health literacy issues in mind in choosing the materials to send back with the volunteer. Yet there was one patient who specifically asked for information at the college level, 4th year! Another patient was so grateful for this service that she said she was going to call President Obama and tell him. From the Volunteer Log:

   The man that requested a lot of information for his wife last week is still here today. He just wanted to say thank you to the Librarian for all the information that was sent over and how quickly she got it for him. He found it very helpful.

The requests come in all shapes and sizes. Sometimes the patient requests information for a family member and not themselves. On one occasion, two sisters, one of whom was very sick, wanted information about grief because their mother had passed away and they were still very sad. They greatly appreciated the attention to this “other” health issue. Even when the patient and family feel comfortable with the information they already have, they are very happy simply to be asked if they would like more. The quality of the interaction between volunteer and patient is at least as important as the numbers of rooms visited each shift. In terms of quantity, the statistics for February through December 2011, 343 rooms were visited with 218 requests filled, most brought back to the patient rooms within 2 hours. The form the volunteer uses has space for email or regular mail, and when a patient is close to discharge, the information is sent through one of these options.

The program has received attention of hospital visitors who learn of this program and others have heard of it through an article in “Patient Education Management” (December 2011). The staff have had the opportunity to mentor other librarians who would like to put some version of this program in place – from Puerto Rico to New York to California. Forms and cover letters, process and procedures are available for sharing and changing according to the hospital’s needs. These creative ideas are adaptable to many settings with many different variations. Librarians can take the library to the patient and in this case, through a partnership with the Volunteer Department. It a matter of making the program fit the needs of their organization.

It is necessary to continue to advertise the program within the organization at committees, teams, staff meetings and to leaders of the hospital. This way the volunteers are welcomed on the floors and nursing staff will feel comfortable answering questions about patient education needs. Librarians are in a unique position to be able to extend an invitation to patients and families to become more knowledgeable about their health and add to the overall satisfaction with their health care experience. It is also very satisfying for the librarian to be able to reach beyond the walls to make the connection with the patients and extend the resources of the health library.