The Health and Medical Reference Committee (HMRC), under the American Library Association (ALA) Reference and User Services Association’s (RUSA) Reference Services Section (RSS), recently updated RUSA’s Guidelines for Medical, Legal, and Business Responses. The purpose of the new Health and Medical Reference Guidelines is to assist all information services staff in responding to health or medical inquiries, regardless of questions or library type. For staff who rarely answer medical questions, the Guidelines are intended to assist them to be prepared and feel confident that they are providing the best possible response. For staff who regularly answer medical questions, the Guidelines are intended to ensure that reference skills are well-rounded.

In June 2016 the Health & Medical Reference Committee offered a Discussion Forum at ALA Annual. Co-sponsored by ACRL’s Health Sciences Interest Group, the program taught participants how to use the Guidelines to train staff how to provide excellent health and medical reference service. The program distributed a PowerPoint presentation, titled Quick Start Guide to Providing Excellent Health Reference, in addition to learning activities that could be adapted by any organization or institution as training materials for those answering health and medical reference questions. The bulk of the adaptable presentation took the Guidelines and translated them into specific Best Practices and reference interview Behaviors to help trainers interpret the Guidelines for the reference workers they would teach.

GUIDELINE

2.2 Staff should use discretion during the reference interview. While it is important to conduct a thorough interview, this should be done in such a way as to minimize discomfort to the user.

2.5 Staff should be welcoming, as asking health related questions can be stressful and/or embarrassing to the library users and the staff.

GUIDELINE

3.2.5 Staff should promote access to health information for all by creating an impartial and non-judgmental environment of inquiry in order to support informed health care decisions.

BEHAVIOR

Provide a safe, private space for reference interviews. Ask if they would like to move to a more private location.

Give patrons your time and attention without distractions.

Eye contact is very important.

Listen attentively.

BEHAVIOR

Practice compassionate neutrality. Avoid statements of judgment.

Be aware of your body language and tone of voice.

Do not judge, give an opinion, or tell the person “It’s probably nothing;” validate feelings by focusing on the information.

The Quick Start Guide to Providing Excellent Health Reference, which translates the Guidelines into best practices, is meant to be used alongside the Health and Medical Reference Guidelines as well as a scenario-based learning activity. Quick Start Training Activities encourage the trainer to divide training participants into small groups. Each group is given a reference scenario and several prompts. The groups are asked to use the Guidelines to answer the reference question, and to discuss the themes and issues that arise from the particular scenario. All three parts to the training curriculum can be found at the Health and Medical Reference Committee’s Website at: http://www.ala.org/rusa/contacts/rosters/rss/rss-refmed.