

## On My Mind

### For Ethical Reference, Pare the Paraprofessionals

By Steve McKinzie

What would you think of a group of lawyers who routinely allowed their staff of paralegals to argue their clients' cases in court? What would you think of a corresponding group of physicians who regularly permitted their nurses to write prescriptions and perform standard surgeries?

If you disapproved of either of these scenarios, then you're part of the majority. Most people believe that certain responsibilities of a profession should only be carried out by certified members of that profession. Indeed, part of the definition of a professional involves having the responsibility to execute certain specific tasks—things that no one else can or should do. For most of us, professionals who assign professional-specific responsibilities to someone other than members of their profession have let their standards slip to an unethical degree. They have shirked their duty.

Now if you happen to be a librarian and you responded with a measure of disapproval to these two hypothetical situations, you aren't just in the minority: You are also hypocritical. We librarians can scarcely escape the charge of hypocrisy, for we readily insist that other professions have the obligation of maintaining ethical and professional standards, but we don't apply the rule to ourselves.

If you don't believe me, consider the widespread practice of employing support staff or paraprofessionals at the reference desk for what some are calling routine or basic questions. The practice pointedly violates the Code of Ethics of the American Library Association, which specifically mandates providing "the highest level of service to all library users . . . and accurate, unbiased, and courteous responses to all requests." That wording clearly implies that the most difficult di-

mensions of librarianship—which certainly include accurate and solid reference service—require the highest levels of service.

Although the contention that reference service is fundamentally a task for a librarian may seem elitist, it really isn't at all. Library professionals and library staff simply have differing roles and responsibilities. Support staff, who are often highly

educated and especially competent in some areas, aren't specifically trained to be professional reference librarians. Frequently pressed into service by administrators who hope to forgo the cost of more expensive professional librarians, library support staff who routinely perform reference service resemble nurses who write prescriptions or paralegals who work as lawyers. The practice tends to exploit our staff and underserve our users. It isn't good policy. It isn't sound management.

In the final analysis, no matter how simple some of the queries that librarians field may be, or how routine some of the inquiries we handle, the normal intricacies of reference demand professional training and ongoing professional commitment. Even seemingly basic questions at a reference desk can turn out to be far more involved than they at first seem, just as minor medical symptoms or mundane legal matters often mask larger, more complicated issues. A simple ache could be the first sign of cancer. A basic question of liability could lead to complicated litigation. An apparently straightforward reference query could be but the first step in an extended research process.

Traditionally most librarians have regarded quality reference service as a professional responsibility—something that only highly trained MLS-credentialed librarians provide. One therefore wonders how librarians have come to regard their professional reference responsibilities as something that almost anyone can do even a bit as well as a librarian.

To be sure, librarians with even the best of intentions and with the highest quality of training sometimes make mistakes. They can fail their users or shortchange their clients, just as lawyers, physicians, or almost any group of professionals can provide less-than-competent service. But all professionals—be they medical, legal, or whatever—have been given the specialized training and orientation to service that equips them for success.

#### *If not us, then who?*

Librarians, with their innate sense of egalitarianism, their intrinsic parsimoniousness, and their mock modesty, may be reluctant to insist on professional standards and professional responsibilities. They may be unwilling to claim there are some things that librarians can do and no one else. That is understandable, but it is also tragic. It is a mistake for us to undervalue the quality of professional library service, just as it is a dereliction of our responsibilities to underplay our users' needs. It comes down to this: If librarians aren't willing to champion the uniqueness of their calling and the professional dimensions of the profession, then who will?

Indeed, an ethical concern for our users—clients who deserve the highest level of service and the best information available—compels us to do something to alter the present state of affairs and end the standard practice of allowing support staff to field reference queries, no matter how routine or seemingly commonplace. As librarians, we should insist that our own professional ethics demand the highest possible quality of traditional library service.

Of course, such an insistence may come at a high price. It flies in the face of a national trend toward cost-cutting, and it may appear reprehensible to those in our ranks who value economy more than the needs of our users. But none of that should bother us. It is high time that we professional librarians demanded that there are just some things that we should do and no one else. Like it or not, that is part of what being a professional is all about. ♦

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