

# ALIA members: Responding to challenge



**Virginia Walsh**

Executive director

Fresh from our exciting Adelaide conference, I was delighted to meet seventy health librarians at Epworth Hospital, Melbourne, on 30 October at the invitation of the president of the Health Libraries Section (Victoria), David Lloyd. It was timely to talk with this group, immediately after the conference with its presentations on client focus, knowledge management and the place of librarians in an information-hungry but competitive environment. ALIA's 458 health and hospital librarian members have weathered sweeping organisational change and contraction of budgets. They continue to respond to the increasing complexity of scientific and medical information needs and sources and to the demands of management to justify their contribution to health care, research and teaching.

For a small group under such pressure, they are nationally and at State level very active within the Association, sharing with each other at meetings and through correspondence and newsletters up-to-date information on professional development, client service improvements and survival strategies.

I have been particularly impressed by the annual statistical surveys of health libraries in Victoria, conducted by Stephen Due of the Geelong Hospital Library. The value of projects like this has been demonstrated in ALIA's survey of 100 corporate libraries, where the message is that, by the time a library service is threatened, it is usually too late to defend it. I welcome any initiatives from other groups within the Association to provide the latest statistical data on the work of librarians and of libraries. In lobbying for the profession, such evidence supports our efforts to promote the value of libraries and librarians in an information-hungry environment where others compete to be expert providers.

No magic wands insulate libraries from government economic policy but patient, persistent lobbying achieves incremental gains. As a result of national and local efforts, the *Interim report of the national expert advisory group on safety and quality in Australian health care*, published in April this year, includes in its first recommendation a request to Health Ministers to expand the role of libraries in assisting the community to gain access to information through the internet and other sources. It is to be hoped that this recommendation is accepted and supported by governments.

Like the conference, the meeting in Melbourne gave me and, I hope, the participants, further proof of the value of ALIA membership. Our members are our Association, from the voluntary activities and ideas of individuals and groups to the work of the National Office, supplying the framework, the services and the vision to position the library profession as a significant contributor to an information-rich Australia in the 21st century.

Recent developments include:

- Lobbying for the greater recognition of librarians' information literacy skills (with argument supplied by the ALIA Information Literacy special interest group in South Australia) in the Government's plans for the information economy;
- ALIA participation in the Online Australia Day, organised by the National Office for the Information Economy (see our website for details);
- Continuing correspondence with Government on digital information issues and the impact on libraries of a goods and services tax;
- Expansion of e-mail membership services to include automatic placement on the aliaNEWS list, providing news and reports on sector issues.

Industrially, ALIA has played a leading role in the landmark NSW pay equity inquiry, described as the most important event in the struggle for equal pay since 1972. At ALIA's direct suggestion, the State government accepted librarians as the major professional group for study. We were asked to assist in preparing the case and, as a result, the NSW Government has formally recommended to the Industrial Relations Commission that new classification structures be created for librarians with new pay scales to redress identified inequities.

We have recently issued a draft statement on core knowledge requirements and we are delighted with the input we have received from many of our members which has helped us to make this statement the significant document it needs to be. After extensive research and consultations with other professional organisations, we are well on the track to producing an accreditation program for continuing professional development undertaken by our members. This will be an important element for members to use to improve their skills and to advance their careers.

After a year of negotiation and organisational change, ALIA is determined not only to defend the interests of library professionals, libraries and their users but also to demonstrate to governments and to the community that we are key professionals in a society whose prosperity springs from information transformed into knowledge.

And, finally, a salute to Di Booker and her team on the biennial conference committee. The program, the ceremonial components and the social events were wonderfully planned and executed. Of special note was the success of the fringe conference which attracted many students and recent graduates — many of whom stayed on to participate in the main event.

I wish all our members a happy and peaceful Christmas and new year and hope that 1999 is a very successful year for all of you. ■

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