

Security and Libraries?

Knife or iron bar wielding gentlemen: this is the first thing that comes to my mind. Not a common happening in libraries? No, but it happened in the Alice Springs Public Library, making me very aware that staff need safety and security training. It was during holiday activities that noises in the foyer alerted me to problems. A very large man was waving both a butcher's knife and a machete at a woman covered in blood on the floor. A staff

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member had rushed to help her – to my horror, as it was during the peak of the AIDS epidemic.

Someone behind me whispered, "I'll ring the police." I shut the door behind me, aware other staff members were making sure no one followed me. I kept on talking to the man while trying to get the staff member to move out of range of his weapons. I managed to get him to back out of the library just as ambulance officers arrived, who took over talking to him until the police arrived. All this happened within minutes, but felt like hours.

We tend to think of library security as looking after our stock and making sure no one makes off with part of the collections, computers, or other items. But security is also caring for both ourselves and our customers/clients. Thus a high priority in security should be occupational health and safety training and making library premises safe for everyone: teaching staff correct ways of handling resources and equipment, encouraging users to observe safety procedures, while we ensure that nothing gives anyone grounds to sue us!

It also raises the need to adequately staff our libraries. Some libraries have late hours with only one staff member on duty. This may be a good way of keeping costs down, but leaves people open to danger. I worked in a two storey university campus library – evening shift had one person on duty from 5:30pm until 8:30pm. After closing we would lock the doors and then check no one had remained in the building. One evening, checking upstairs I discovered someone hiding in the stacks – he'd left the library earlier and returned without

being seen. The next day he was picked up at another campus library and found to be mentally ill. This fright led us to acquire a mobile phone so we could call campus security if in need.

Security means being safety conscious in our relationships with library users, as well as in how we operate our services. Security is not just about keeping the burglar out, but ensuring people in the library are in a safe and secure environment.

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