Public Health Perspectives

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PUBLIC HEALTH PERSPECTIVES #15



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Public Health Behind the Reference Desk: How a Health Educator Ended Up Running a Library

Hello, and thanks for reading. I did not set out to run a library. I trained as a health educator, spent years teaching public health, and somehow landed in a health sciences library in West Texas. I hope my story shows that public health has more doors than most people realize, and that it is okay if the one you walk through is not the one you pictured.

1. My perspective

The biggest thing is being able to explain something clearly to all kinds of people. Health educators pick this up early, and it never stops being useful. You can have the best evidence in the world, but if it does not land with the person in front of you, it is not worth much. I lean on that same habit now with medical students, nursing students, physical therapy students, residents, and the library staff I supervise.

You also need to be comfortable with evidence. A lot of my teaching and conference work has been on evidence-based public health: how to find good studies, read them honestly, and use them in a real program. Decent writing helps. So does a little project management and budgeting, because sooner or later someone hands you a grant and expects you to keep it on track.

Most of my training came in pieces. The EdD and the MCHES® credential came from the health education side. Later I went back for a Master of Library and Information Science with a focus on health and e-science, and that is what opened the library door.

Along the way I added certificates in project management, change management, Six Sigma for health care, and health impact assessment through the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. None of them were glamorous, but they gave me words and tools for work I was already doing.

- **How did you get from the classroom to the library?**

It happened in steps, and a few of them were accidents. I started in New York, where I did an internship at the National Center for Health Education, worked as a health education liaison at P.S. 200, and finished my doctorate at Teachers College, Columbia University. After a year at Northern Arizona University, I spent eight years on the faculty at Jackson State University in Mississippi, teaching program planning, program evaluation, epidemiology, and health promotion to master's and doctoral students.

The library side showed up near the end of my time there. I led a project to update the health science library at Jackson State and improve how people could find health information, and I finished my Master of Library and Information Science at Wayne State University around the same time. Looking back, that project was where the two fields first fit together for me.

From there I worked as the university librarian at Stanbridge University in California, and then I joined the University of Wyoming, where I spent six years in library administration, outreach, and NNLM work before moving to Odessa in 2026. I never stopped teaching, though. I still teach online for Walden University and Southern New Hampshire University, and I have done consulting work in health education and educational technology, including telemedicine in Belize, school-based health education in Dubai, a community health worker program in Iran, and children's eating behaviors in Sri Lanka.

- **What were the challenges you had to deal with in performing your job, or, accomplishing what you set out to do.**

Changing fields was the first hurdle. I finished the library degree while I was still teaching, and being a student again while holding down a faculty job was humbling, to put it kindly.

Distance came next. When I was the public health engagement specialist for the Network of the National Library of Medicine, Region 4, my territory covered nine states, and a good chunk of it was rural. You cannot just swing by a community organization that is a long drive from anywhere. I learned to build relationships through video calls, email, and showing up at state conferences, and to listen before I started talking.

Then there is misinformation. I have given a talk a few times now whose title asks what library staff are supposed to do about health mis- and disinformation, and I still do not

have a neat answer. What seems to help is meeting people where they are and not talking down to them.

And I will be honest about the paperwork. Sub-awards, budgets, reporting, and ethics review at two universities are not why anyone goes into public health, but the programs do not run without them.

- **What did you find the most fulfilling about the job, the activity, the project?**

The people, easily. I have chaired doctoral dissertations at Walden and MPH dissertations at the University of Liverpool, and watching a student go from a fuzzy idea to a finished study never gets old. Southern New Hampshire University also gave me its Outstanding Educator Award for health professions programs in 2024, which I appreciated.

I also think a lot about the Moby Bookmobile in Wyoming, where we took health education materials out to the Wind River Reservation. It was a simple idea, a bookmobile and a lot of conversations, but it put useful information straight into people's hands.

Mentoring ranks high too. I have been a PHENOM mentor since 2013, and I helped with a mentoring and internship program for health science library students. These days I am back around students every day at the TTUHSC Permian Basin campus in Odessa, where the library supports nursing, physical therapy, and medical students and residents. We even have 3D printers that get used for anatomical models. I am still getting to know the community here, so ask me again in a year.

- **How has professional service shaped your work?**

Volunteering with professional organizations has taught me as much as some of my courses did. I joined the advocacy committee of the Society for Public Health Education in 2003. Over the years I served as Speaker of the House and, most recently, as Treasurer, which meant looking after a budget of more than one million dollars. SOPHE gave me a Presidential Citation in 2026.

I also served three terms on the Divisional Board for the Certification of Health Education Specialists at NCHEC, the group behind the CHES® and MCHES® credentials. That work included reviewing the certification process and helping with item-writing workshops for the exam.

Writing and reviewing have been part of the mix as well. I served as Associate Editor for books and media reviews at Health Promotion Practice, where I helped other health professionals write their reviews. I also review manuscripts for several journals.

Away from work, I co-founded Muriel's Angels, a California nonprofit that provides products and services to disabled children who do not qualify for state or federal help. I still serve as its treasurer.

2. Suggestions

For someone who would be interested in doing what you are doing, what kind of preparation would they need (education-wise, training, etc.)

There is no single right road. If health education appeals to you, a degree in public health or health education is a good place to start, and it is worth looking into the CHES® exam through NCHEC. MCHES® can come later. Just as important, get out and work with real people early. A professional internship at the National Center for Health Education and a stint as a health education liaison at an elementary school in New York taught me things no class could.

If the information side sounds interesting, as it did for me, the usual route is a master's in library and information science from an American Library Association-accredited program, ideally with a health or biomedical focus. You do not have to pick one world over the other. Mine overlap more every year. I would also get comfortable searching PubMed, reading a study critically, and using whatever AI tools are showing up in your field, because people are going to ask you about them. I earned a certificate in AI programming essentials in 2023 and sat on an AI initiatives council at the University of Wyoming libraries, so I speak from some experience.

Join a professional association early and say yes to something small. A committee seat, a conference session, or a book review can lead to bigger things. Book reviews are a gentle way into publishing, and I have written several for Health Promotion Practice.

And find a mentor. It is probably the easiest advice to give and the one people skip most often.

What kind of resources would be the most helpful

A few places I would point you to first:

- NNLM, the Network of the National Library of Medicine: free classes, funding opportunities, and public health resources. https://nnlm.gov
- NCHEC: information on the CHES® and MCHES® credentials and the competencies behind them. https://www.nchec.org
- SOPHE, the Society for Public Health Education: I have been involved for years, and it is a good place to meet people. https://www.sophe.org
- Medical Library Association: worth a look if the library side catches your eye. https://www.mlanet.org

- PubMed and MedlinePlus: good, free places to practice finding reliable health information. https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov and https://medlineplus.gov
- Health Statistics on the Web, a talk I gave that is shared openly: https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.17604793
- Evidence-Based Practice for Librarians, another talk of mine you are welcome to use: https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.17350950

Thanks again for reading. If any of this sparks a question, send a note my way. I am always happy to talk about public health careers, including the winding ones.

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