



Health and Safety in the Library Workplace: Lessons from COVID-19 Pandemic Adaptive Practices and Guidelines

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Abstract

Health and safety management are priorities in libraries necessary to ensure workers well-being, patrons' safety and sustenance of information services. Several factors exist in the library workplace that are potential risk factors for infectious disease transmission. These include the library's nature as community facilities, enclosed spaces, poor social distancing, and high personal contact points. The outbreak of COVID-19 pandemic raised unprecedented awareness of health and safety susceptibility challenges in the library workplace and their potential to disrupt the system. The paper discussed library environmental risk factors for infectious disease transmission. It reviewed library adaptive practices for service continuity and workplace safety during the COVID-19 pandemic disruptions. The practices included optimized digital services, virtual programmes, contactless book borrowing and return system and others. It also reviewed health recommendations and guidelines on personal and environmental hygiene issued by library organizations and professionals for disease preventive actions during the COVID-19 pandemic. The paper concludes that despite the remission of the pandemic, the threat of old and new infectious diseases emerging is unending. This necessitates that libraries have well designed policies, guidelines, and practices for workplace health and safety. The various COVID-19 health protocols provide lessons for health and safety management in libraries. They should be strategically implemented for a healthy library workplace.

Keywords: Health and Safety, Libraries, Workplace safety, COVID-19 Pandemic, Environmental hygiene, Adaptive Service Strategies.

Introduction

Health and safety management are priorities in libraries necessary to ensure workers well-being, patrons' safety and sustenance of information services. The outbreak of Covid -19 pandemic raised unprecedented awareness of health and safety susceptibility challenges in the library workplace and their potential to disrupt the system. It also raised awareness of the potential impact of infectious diseases on library service sustainability.

Libraries have been affected by social crisis and natural disasters which in many cases disrupted their services and sometimes completely destroyed their structures. Nevertheless, many still emerged to continue to provide lifesaving information to the affected people and communities. However, the impact of the Coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic on libraries is historically unprecedented and the wave of disruption was territory nondiscriminatory, affecting libraries worldwide. Globally, the COVID-19 pandemic resulted in severe service disruptions, cancellation of programmes, conferences and workshops, job furlough, redundancy and termination of appointments. The greatest impact on library services by the pandemic was the physical closure of libraries. Following the spread of the virus, by March 2020 there were reports of mass closure of libraries in countries and regions locking out both staff and users from the physical library environment (IFLA 2020; ALA, 2020; Pilch, 2020; Peet, May 2020, July 2020; and Ford, 2020).

The pandemic health crises highlighted the need for continuous measures to mitigate the transmission of disease pathogens in the library workplace. It also highlighted the importance of adaptive strategies that ensure uninterrupted library services in a challenging period. World Health Organization, (2010) defined a healthy workplace as “one in which workers and managers collaborate to use a continual improvement process to protect and promote the health, safety and wellbeing of all workers and the sustainability of the workplace.” According to Malik (2024) workplace safety refers to the measures and protocols put in place to protect employees and prevent accidents, injuries, and illnesses in the workplace. Workplace safety is important because it helps protect the well-being of employees, prevents workplace accidents and injuries, reduces healthcare costs, improves productivity, and ensures compliance with occupational safety and health regulations.

The paper discusses the library environmental risk factors for disease transmission. It reviews library response to the COVID-19 pandemic disruptions through adaptive practices which ensured safety and service continuity in the challenging environment. The paper also reviews health practice recommendations and guidelines issued by library organizations and professionals that streamlined preventive actions.

The library environmental factors and the risk of infectious disease transmission

Infectious diseases such as COVID-19 and other transmittable diseases caused by pathogens such as viruses, bacteria, and fungi pose serious health risks to humans. These categories of diseases are highly transmitted in enclosed areas through person to person in close contact, through inhalation or touching of body fluids, nasal discharge or saliva droplets from an infected person to a non - infected person (WHO, 2020). Several factors exist in the library workplace that are potential risk factors for infectious disease transmission and other health and safety issues. These integral factors include:

Community facilities: Libraries are community facilities defined by CDC (2020) as facilities visited by the public outside of a household. Libraries as community facilities attract a wide range of people from diverse populations and home enclosures visiting at a common time to access the services and use the resources. Since there is no health check in the library, people with varied types of illnesses interact with others unrestrained, increasing the risk of transmission of infections. Equally, library facilities are community owned and therefore commonly used. Diverse users borrow print resources such as books and journals, use photocopying machines and computers for prolonged period of time. Furniture, and equipment are shared facilities and high touch surfaces that increases the risk of disease pathogen transmission.

Enclosed spaces: Libraries are by nature enclosed centres of public gathering. Public reading rooms such as the library reader's service departments are enclosed spaces that accommodate several patrons who are accustomed to sitting for hours in close proximity to each other. Since infectious diseases are usually airborne, and can accumulate in the air overtime through sneezing, coughing, and exhaling, the risk of transmission of infections from person to person in enclosed spaces like libraries is high.

Poor social distancing: The library seating arrangements are often closely knitted together with poor social distancing making for easy spread of air droplets to other occupants and increases the risk of disease transmission.

Personal contacts: There are high contact points in libraries raising the risk of disease transmission. High person to person contact increases the risk for library workers and patrons. There is staff to patron contact, staff to staff contact, and patron to patron contact. These direct physical contacts by diverse library patrons with staff are high risk factors for disease transmission.

These key features show there are reasonable risk factors for the sequence of infectious disease spread in the library work environment and raises the need for continuous attention to health and safety management (Anyaoku, 2021). It also necessitates that library professionals take care of themselves, the patrons and the community through disease preventive actions.

Adaptive practices for health and continuity of services: COVID-19 measures.

One recommendation for prevention of COVID-19 disease transmission was reducing physical contact by individuals and therefore reducing avenues for disease transmission. Enforcement of physical distancing during COVID-19 pandemic led in some cases to closure of many institutions including libraries. To mitigate the effect on users, libraries were constrained to taking detours from the normal library procedures by incorporating various measures that were meant to safeguard the health of staff and users and equally ensure continuity of services. Libraries reduced physical contact through remote work, digital services, and limiting the number of staff and patrons in attendance at any point in time.

Optimized digital services: it is noteworthy that during the pandemic, one major adaptive strategy by libraries was to optimize digital services. When the pandemic led to physical closure of libraries, many continued to offer wealth of digital content through online platforms. According to Fallows (2020), when libraries closed their doors abruptly, they immediately opened their digital communications, collaborations, and creative activity to reach their public in ways as novel as the virus that forced them into it. Library users could access the collections without being physically present in the library thereby not having potential contact with disease pathogens. Falt and Das (2020) reported that as the world responded to the COVID-19 pandemic, most Governments temporarily closed all educational institutions. Consequently, there was a transition to distance learning and eLearning on an unprecedented scale. Digital libraries and publishers rose to the occasion, and offered more and more free content and curating personalized collections so that people could continue to read and learn without disruption. Reports show good reception and high access to library digital content during the lockdown. EBLIDA (2020) reported that access to the library digital offers more than doubled in many cases. Statistics concerning the use of digital platforms in March-April 2020 compared to the same period in the previous year showed an exponential increase during the COVID-19 crisis.

Virtual programmes: The sudden emergence of the pandemic accompanied with rules on social distancing, ban on mass gathering, library programmes and activities that required in person gathering were halted. Some of these programmes were shifted online. There was an upsurge in virtual meetings, programmes, virtual networks and webinars. Major conferences were shifted to virtually conferences. This ensured continuity of the programmes with compliance with physical distancing and thereby protecting health of staff and users. Libraries organized educational, social and literacy activities, holiday programmes, story hours, information literacy promotional activities, training workshops through platforms like Zoom, YouTube bringing people together remotely. Virtual hosting had an added advantage of extending the reach of the programmes. The University of Nigeria, Children Centre Saturday story hour was consistently delivered through Zoom by librarians during the pandemic. Using the WhatsApp platform, invitation was extended to children worldwide. Also, other libraries such as Denver Public Library reported that the library's popular Storytimes went virtual and viral – librarians from across the city delivered three daily live YouTube Storytimes in English and Spanish targeting a wider range of people (Local Leader Voices, 2020).

Contactless book borrowing and return system and book drops: Many libraries reported initiating innovative book borrowing and return services such as pick-up, drop-off services, curbside pickup which involved limited or no physical contact with library staff and therefore ensured social distancing safety protocols (Fallows, 2020; bibliotheca, 2020). In the pickup protocol, preordered labeled items were dropped in designated areas for requesting user to pick up without contact with library staff (California state Libraries, 2020). There was also book drops services where librarians undertook home delivery services with book packages to be dropped and picked up at the door (EBLIDA, 2020). Anambra State Public Library for example expanded their services to include distribution of books to children who could not visit the library due to the health crises.

Health practice recommendation and guidelines issued by library organizations and institutions during COVID-19 pandemic

Disease prevention actions were taken by librarians in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. These preventive actions were guided by various guidelines and recommendations swiftly developed by library organizations, and professionals. A guideline is a statement by which to determine a course of action. A guideline aims to streamline particular processes according to a set routine or sound practice (Wikipedia). The COVID-19 guidelines provided public health, infection prevention and control measures, specific to libraries (California State Libraries 2020) and supported continuation of library services in the disruptive period. According to OSHWiki (2020) These non-binding guidelines helped employers and workers to stay safe and healthy in a working environment that was changed significantly because of the COVID-19 pandemic.

The guidelines and recommendations addressed the following:

1. Basic hygiene protocols: General guideline on health and safety practices for library staff and patrons
2. Social and physical distancing in libraries
3. Environmental hygiene: Cleaning library building and facilities
4. Safe disinfecting and handling of library materials

Basic hygiene protocols: General guideline on health and safety practices for library staff and patrons

Basic hygiene protocols were mainly personal hygiene guidelines outlining measures by staff and patrons to prevent disease acquisition and spread. Many hygiene guidelines from the library organizations mirrored the general health guidelines from Centre for Disease Control (CDC), WHO and other health organizations. They included basic personal hygiene guideline of hand washing, use of hand sanitizers and use of personal protective equipment like face masks and coverings. Library recommendations emphasized frequent hand washing with soap and water for 20 seconds, the use of alcohol hand sanitizers and wearing of face masks by library workers and patrons. There were also recommendations on providing these facilities at strategic locations in the libraries to ensure easy accessibility (AFLIA 2020; Yale University Library 2020).

Though the guidelines recommended mandatory wearing of facemasks to prevent nasal and oral droplets from spreading to others, many prioritized handwashing and social distancing. Scotgov.sct (2020), stated that physical distancing, hand washing and respiratory hygiene are the most important and effective measures that can be adopted to prevent the spread of Coronavirus. Therefore, the wearing of face coverings must not be used as an alternative to any of these other precautions.

Handwashing was also preferred over hand sanitizers for collection safety. The former removes dirt and oils and the latter does not. Dirt and oils can transfer to collections and stain or damage them NEDCC (2020)

Social and physical distancing in libraries

Social distancing refers to measures that are taken to increase the physical space between people to slow the spread of the virus. Scotgov.sct (2020) emphasized physical distancing as a key plank of workplace-specific measures to create a safe working environment. Social distancing is a safety precautional measure in the library to mitigate library environmental health constrains. By maintaining a distance of six feet from others when possible, people may limit the spread of the virus (Gross & Padilla, 2020). Basic recommendations for physical distancing during the COVID-19 pandemic included remote work from home for services that can be done remotely. As precautionary measures during the COVID-19 pandemic, libraries instituted a range of safety measures to minimize contact and ensure social distancing in the public reading areas, staff work areas and staff contact with users. There was rearranging and changing of library furniture layouts in public reading areas to accommodate social distancing of 2 meters spacing. Other measure was inscribing signages to indicate seats that were off-limits. Some libraries installed plexiglass shields that served as barrier and limit to physical contact between individuals both staff and patrons. (Bibliotheca, 2020).

Environmental hygiene: Recommendations on cleaning library building and facilities

Environmental hygiene in the library refers to maintaining and promoting the cleanliness of the library surroundings, building and facilities to prevent the structure and items from being carrier of diseases pathogens that can infect humans. Daily cleaning, continuous disinfection and fumigation of library facilities are paramount in maintaining a healthy workplace in the library and helps prevent the transmission of infections. Hygiene practices for libraries at all times can be culled from recommendations from library organizations during the pandemic.

For library floors, normal routine cleaning and disinfecting library areas with water, soap and 70% alcohol-based disinfectant were considered effective for keeping the library environment safe from virus transmission. Disinfection is a two-step process of first cleaning then disinfecting, and most disinfectants need to stay on a surface for several minutes to be effective against coronavirus (Thomas & Sheppard, 2020). Desks, counters, and tables need to be disinfected in between use by every person.

For faculties and equipment, Isopropyl alcohol or ethanol were preferred to be effective for disinfecting the keyboard and other high-touch areas. The recommendation is to clean and disinfect shared equipment using sanitizing wipes containing 70% ethyl or isopropyl alcohol. The sanitizer should dry completely before the next person touches the equipment.

It was also recommended that staff/users should wash hands with soap and water after disinfecting shared equipment (NYU Libraries 2020).

Professional cleaning was recommended for internal hard surfaces, including tabletops, door handles, book drops, and computers. It was advised that, if possible, library management should engage a professional cleaning service that has appropriate training and personal protective equipment to clean the library hard surfaces (Ewen, March 2020).

Recommendations on safe disinfecting and handling of library materials

Quarantining: Quarantining was recommended as the most effective method of disinfecting library materials particular books resources, and external storage devices such as DVDs and the safest way to keep them free from the virus (NEDCC, 2020). This is the storing of returned library materials in a secluded area for a minimum length of time and non-handling until the expiration of the time limit. Ewen (March 2020) noted that time is the best disinfectant. The easiest, safest, and most inexpensive disinfectant is time. Stepping back may be the best defense against a developing health threat. According to Navsaria and Bowie (2020) quarantine is pretty simple. Just leave it somewhere untouched by human beings. Quarantine requires no special training to implement, is not expensive, and does not risk damaging collections.

Suggested quarantine periods for paper-based materials range from 24 - 120 hours. Quarantine periods for non-paper-based library materials, such as CDs, DVDs, plastic-covered books, etc., also range from 72 - 216 hours (LGMA 2020). It was recommended that libraries set up an area of the building as a materials isolation zone for those items that may have recently been exposed to the COVID-19 virus. This area could be a cleared range of shelving, a series of multiple book carts, or even piles of books on a table. Materials should be labeled with dates of when those items entered quarantine and when they are safe to reshelve (LGMA) 2020).

Effect of disinfectants and cleaning on books: It is important to note that many of the guideline pointed out the damaging effects of disinfectants and chemical cleaners on books. NEDCC stated that disinfectants can damage paper and electronics, and cost money. In addition, no one has time to disinfect every single page of every book, thereby limiting their effectiveness. Regents Public Library Advisory Council (RPLAC) (2020) stated that while expensive "book sterilization" or "book disinfection" equipment is now being marketed to libraries, archives, and museums, there is no evidence or studies to suggest that these technologies are effective or won't cause unnecessary damage to collections.

Some sterilization agents are not recommended for library materials. One example is use of Ultraviolet (UV) radiation exposure as a means of sterilization. UV sterilization is effective only on surfaces that are directly exposed to UV radiation, so stacked materials or pages inside closed books will not be thoroughly sanitized so the effort could prove fruitless. Equally, while potentially effective in the right application, UV exposure poses serious risks to human health, including cataracts and skin cancer. Additionally, UV light is known to cause irreversible light damage to collections materials, including fading, discoloration, embrittlement, and accelerated aging (NEDCC; Ewen, 2020).

Lessons from COVID-19 Adaptive Practices and Guidelines.

COVID-19 pandemic highlighted health and safety susceptibility challenges in the library workplace and the need for practices to mitigate the risk factors for transmission of infections in the libraries. It is of note that following the remission of the pandemic, various measure put in place for health and safety during the pandemic have been discontinued in majority of the libraries in Nigeria for instance. Handwashing facilities have virtually disappeared in the libraries. However, despite the remission of COVID-19 pandemic, the threat of new infectious diseases emerging is unending with continuous alert being issued by health organizations of potential infectious disease threats. Therefore, health and safety are still ongoing issues. The various COVID-19 prevention protocols provide lessons for health and safety management in libraries to forestall the threat of infectious disease disrupting the services.

Digital services ensured that libraries continued to offer information services to the society in a safe manner despite the disruptive impact of the coronavirus disease. It is therefore important that library management prioritizes digital library development s a tool for remote access and avenue for uninterrupted library services. They should exploit the full potentials of the internet as an information delivery platform for print and electronic collections. Emphasis should be on acquisition of digital resources such as eBooks, ejournals e-databases and eLearning tools and development of web-based platforms such as websites and discovery systems for the delivery of resources. This will ensure uninterrupted library service at all times.

The guidelines and recommendations that streamlined library response to the coronavirus crisis should be scrutinized, summarized and implemented for health and safety management. Some of the health practices such as wearing face masks may not be in vogue, but it is still imperative to continue with the personal and environmental hygiene protocols that are highly required for health and safety in the library environment. These are summarized as follows:

- **Handwashing facilities:** Handwashing is presented as one of the most effective ways to prevent the spread of infectious diseases. Libraries should promote handwashing through providing handwashing facilities at strategic points in the library well-stocked with soap. Installation of touchless tap systems is highly recommended.
- **Environmental hygiene:** Clean and disinfected library is the passport to healthy workplace and inviting space for learning and relaxation. Daily cleaning, continuous disinfection, proper waste management and fumigation of facilities as recommended are paramount in maintaining a healthy workplace in the library. Fumigation helps in pest control by eliminating insects, rodents and reptiles that are carriers of diseases. Guidelines on proper and adequate cleaning of library buildings and facilities with recommended chemicals and disinfectants are necessary and should be implemented. Periodic invitation of professional cleaners to clean, disinfect, and fumigate the library environment is also very necessary for eliminating disease pathogens and maintaining a healthy library environment.

Adequate and functional water supply system is needed to maintain a clean library. It is essential that library management should ensure regular water supply in the entire

library building. It is the basic commodity for handwashing, clean library and clean toilet facilities.

- **Quarantining books:** Isolating library materials that are borrowed and returned for a defined period as recommended in the guidelines should be a routine practice in libraries. It is a free method of disinfecting library collection that has been loaned out to patrons.
- **Social distancing:** Rearranging library furniture layouts in public reading areas to accommodate social distancing as practiced during the pandemic is a good method of reducing physical contact and thereby preventing disease transmission in the environment.
- **Good ventilation:** Providing adequate ventilation in all areas of the library is a necessity to enable easy outflow of air to prevent air pollution and improve indoor air quality.
- **Health promotion:** As was recommended for COVID-19 practices, library management should promote good health practices for all library staff, regular health checks and adequate treatment for those that are ill.

Conclusion

Despite the remission of the COVID-19 pandemic, health and safety are still ongoing issues in the library. This is because the threat of old and new infectious diseases emerging or reemerging is unending. This necessitates that libraries have well designed policies, guidelines and practices for workplace health and safety management. A clean and disinfected library is the passport to a healthy workplace. The COVID-19 pandemic guidelines and recommendations reinforced the required practices for maintaining a healthy and safe library workplace. Digital services and hosting of virtual programmes that ensured continuity of services during the pandemic have implications for library workplace health and also service sustainability in crisis situations. The various COVID-19 prevention protocols provide lessons for health and safety management in libraries. They should be strategically implemented for a healthy library workplace.

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