

Updating the Wessex Classification Scheme for UK health libraries: a case study in improving inclusion and diversity in a specialist classification scheme

Jason Curtis, Librarian, Shrewsbury and Telford Hospital NHS Trust

Lotty Summers, Library Assistant, University Hospitals Birmingham NHS Foundation Trust

Introduction

The Wessex Classification Scheme¹ was created in the early 1980s by healthcare librarians in the former Wessex Regional Health Authority area in the South West of England, with the aim of improving the cataloguing of items relating to UK healthcare practice.

The scheme consists of two parts. The first is the classification schedule itself, which was loosely based on the US National Library of Medicine (NLM) classification.² The second part is an annotated subject index that is based on a subset of the NLM Medical Subject Headings (MeSH) scheme³ but with Anglicised spelling and some local additions.

The major differences between the NLM and Wessex classification schedules are around psychology and nursing. The librarians of the Wessex region created a new schedule for psychology, and classified books on nursing specialties within the specialty. For example, a book on cardiac nursing is shelved with cardiology books.

The Wessex name is something of a misnomer now as the scheme is widely used in healthcare libraries across the UK, both inside and outside the NHS. Some NHS regions use it exclusively across their library services and have adopted the subject headings list as an authority file in regional library management system consortiums such as SWIMS (South West), HeLM (Midlands), and the upcoming North West and Yorkshire and Humber consortia.

Maintaining the scheme

Although the scheme has gone through several revisions, there had been no major updates since 2013, so the Wessex Classification Scheme Oversight Group was formed in September 2022 with the support of Health Education England (HEE) (now part of NHS England). The group brings together knowledge and skills from across UK health library networks to improve the scheme, whilst offering the opportunity for participants to develop professional skills in classification and subject indexing. It also provides an opportunity to network widely, helps ensure the longevity of the scheme, and shares the maintenance work.

One of NHS England's stated goals is to 'mainstream equalities, diversity and inclusion into every team, function and role'⁴ and their support for updating the Wessex scheme is helping to meet this aim, by creating a higher quality, more inclusive experience for library users.

Up until the formation of the Oversight Group, the Wessex scheme was very much a product of the South West NHS region and was maintained for many years by a small cataloguing group. Changes to the scheme, particularly the subject headings, were not encouraged where these diverged from NLM MeSH due to the difficulty of updating the schedules. These schedules took the form of a series of discrete document files and any change might affect cross-references and require amendments to multiple files, leaving a large margin for error or missed references.

¹ SWIMS Network (2023). Wessex scheme. Available at <https://swimsnetworknhs.uk/how-to-guides/cataloguing/wessex-scheme/>

² National Library of Medicine (2023). NLM classification. Available at <https://classification.nlm.nih.gov/>

³ National Library of Medicine (2023). Medical Subject Headings. Available at <https://www.nlm.nih.gov/mesh/meshhome.html>

⁴ Health Education England (2023). Creating a new NHS England. Available at <https://www.hee.nhs.uk/about/how-we-work/your-area/london/london-news/creating-new-nhs-england>



However, there were small numbers of local headings introduced into the subject headings index, identified within the index as 'Wessex MeSH'. These tended to be terms relating to NHS organisational structures or UK terminology.

Formation of the group

In the summer of 2022, a call was put out for health library staff interested in being part of a nationwide group to update the Wessex scheme. Members were recruited via health library mailing lists such as LIS-Medical, and through communications from HEE. The new Oversight Group collaborates via the FutureNHS platform, and meetings are held virtually via Microsoft Teams.

Opening up the Oversight Group to library staff across England means that there is a greater pool of knowledge and enthusiasm to draw on. Around 30% of the group are para-professional staff, with the rest holding various librarian roles including clinical and outreach librarians, along with a small number of library service managers.

Initially, members were asked which parts of the scheme they felt needed updating the most and sub-groups were then formed for LGBTQ+ issues and gender identity (known as the Pride sub-group), Ethnicity and Race, and Learning Disabilities and Neurodiversity (the LDN sub-group).

Pride sub-group work

Since the last revision of Wessex in 2013, awareness and literature on the topic of LGBTQ+ issues has increased. The sub-group (some of whom identify as LGBTQ+) felt strongly this was an opportunity to educate about LGBTQ+ issues and care requirements.

The sub-group began their work by investigating the HQ classification schedule which covers sexuality, relationships, marriage, and the family. As part of the process, it was found that criminal aspects of sexual behaviour (such as paedophilia and incest) were located within the same section as topics relating to sexual orientation and gender diversity. The sub-group believed this perpetuated a stereotype by linking these topics and suggested they move from HQ to WM (Psychiatry, Mental health) in the classification.

Next, subject headings related to the LGBTQ+ community, gender identity, and gender affirming care were reviewed. This found terms that were no longer used or could be considered offensive, derogatory, or prejudicial. As a result, some terms were removed completely (for example 'hermaphroditism'), and other terms were updated (for example 'gender affirming surgery' rather than 'transsexual surgery'). Resources such as Homosaurus⁵ were used to clarify the best terminology and provide scope notes in the absence of an NLM MeSH definition.

Proposed changes were shared with LGBT+ staff networks and their feedback provided a useful perspective. The work of the sub-group is now complete, and changes were published to the scheme in June 2023 in time to celebrate Pride month.

Ethnicity and race sub-group work

The focus of the Ethnicity and Race sub-group is to ensure that Wessex subject headings are inclusive and current as well as removing terms more appropriate to an American context. In addition to terms used to describe ethnic groups, related topics such as immigration, traditional medicine, homelessness, and health inequalities were also considered.

⁵ Homosaurus (2023). Homosaurus: an international LGBTQ+ linked data vocabulary. Available at <https://homosaurus.org/>

As the subject matter runs throughout the classification scheme it was not possible to interrogate specific classmarks. Instead, subject headings were transformed into one spreadsheet covering all the A-Z documents, which enabled the sub-group to search for potential terms for review. Appropriate resources were consulted before making recommendations to the Oversight Group.

The sub-group faced challenges, with members of the group leaving and the original chair stepping down. Additionally, the membership of the group does not reflect lived experience of the issues concerned and attempts to contact relevant NHS Trust Networks were unsuccessful.

Finding times to meet proved difficult and so the sub-group mostly worked on shared documents via the FutureNHS platform, eventually collating a document of proposed new subject headings (such as Indigenous Peoples), terms for removal (such as African Witch Doctor) and for rewording (for example 'Medicine, oriental' to 'Medicine, traditional').

Learning Disabilities and Neurodiversity (LDN) sub-group work

The term 'neurodiversity' encompasses a range of differences in brain function and behavioural traits, as well as learning disabilities, and it is estimated that 1 in 7 people in the UK are neurodivergent.⁶ The Wessex scheme currently has no subject heading for 'neurodiversity' or for neurodivergent people, yet there is a growing body of literature on neurodiversity available in healthcare libraries.

The LDN sub-group is looking at the language used in the subject index and considering some broader changes to the classification schedules. Some members of the LDN sub-group have lived experience of neurodiversity and are able to bring their experience to this work.

There are several problems with the way Wessex is currently structured regarding neurodiversity, particularly the assumption that neurodiversity is a childhood-only issue. For example, the subject heading for Asperger syndrome (itself an outdated term) specifically describes it as a 'childhood disorder' and suggests that the classmark is within the paediatric section.

Another problem is multiple classmarks for the same topic. An example is dyslexia, where there is the choice of using a classmark within paediatrics, within mental disorders if it is manifested in adulthood, within neurology if it is acquired (for example due to brain injury) or within education if it relates to study skills and teaching methods. This means that books on dyslexia could be shelved in four entirely different places in the library.

The LDN sub-group looks at neurodiversity not through a medical model lens (where for example these conditions might be described as 'mental disorders') and instead seeing it through a social model lens. It has been suggested that changing the structure of the classification scheme and providing up to date subject terms with definitions has an educational function both for library staff doing the classification and cataloguing of materials, but also for library users browsing the shelves or searching the catalogue, and will hopefully improve understanding of neurodiversity.

The sub-group aim to create a new classmark within the Wessex scheme that sits between WLM (psychology) and WM (psychiatry), then to move materials on neurodiversity and learning disabilities to this new sequence, prefixed with WLN. This would bring together neurodiversity books from disparate sections, and remove these books from sections that are concerned with mental disorders.

There are drawbacks to this approach; the work involved in creating an entirely new class would be time consuming and there are implications for specialist mental health libraries that may have large numbers of books needing reclassification.

⁶ British Dyslexia Association (2019). New Guidance: Neurodiversity in the Workplace. Available at <https://www.bdadyslexia.org.uk/news/new-guidance-neurodiversity-in-the-workplace>

The group has faced membership struggles and has lacked professional expertise since the group was almost entirely composed of para-professional staff. However, after a call for new members, the LDN sub-group has some new members, including two librarians as co-chairs.

The future

A year in, the Wessex Oversight Group has much to show for this important work, and there is more to come in the next phase.

Firstly, the Wessex Lead has met with EBSCO to discuss how we might work together to update subject headings in the CINAHL database.⁷ EBSCO have recognised the need to update some of their terminology since their subject headings, like Wessex, are often drawn from NLM MeSH terms. We've shared the work of the Pride sub-group and this has led to some changes to the CINAHL thesaurus. We'll be sharing work that we do in future, so that they can see the changes we make, and they will make us aware of their latest updates.

Secondly, there is work to move the Wessex scheme into a thesaurus management tool called PoolParty. This will provide links between the subject index terms and the classification schedules and will make it easier for cataloguers to interrogate the scheme. PoolParty will ease the updating of subject headings, particularly any cross-references and related terms, and this should facilitate the use of alternative terms to those in the NLM MeSH scheme where it is felt we can promote more inclusive language going forward.

The move to a thesaurus management tool will also facilitate a move towards being hosted on the NHS England website encouraging the scheme's wider use by making it more accessible on a national NHS platform.

Lastly, new sub-groups have been set up to look at several areas, including a group to look at suggestions from users of Wessex in the library community. Going forward we foresee that rather than major new editions of the scheme, there will be smaller updates published on a quarterly basis, allowing the scheme to be more flexible in adapting to changing terminology and healthcare practice.

⁷ EBSCO (2023). CINAHL Database. Available at <https://www.ebsco.com/products/research-databases/cinahl-database>

TIMELINE OF WESSEX CLASSIFICATION SCHEME

