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Tuesday, January 26, 2010

Dear TPL Board Members:

I would like to take a moment of your time to share a story with you about the Toronto Public Library's role in improving the hospital stays of some seriously ill and injured children. Today a nurse asked me if I could get her some foreign language DVDs for a patient who had recently undergone an intense round of radical and life saving surgery. The family of this patient had come in from overseas and did not speak English. It was an honour to go over to a nearby branch of the Toronto Public Library on my lunch break and get 4 videos for this patient. When I delivered them I saw a very young, very frightened and worn out child. Somehow the sight of the child's father gently prying his right hand free of his child's clutch to shake my hand and carefully substituting his left hand for the necessary two seconds this took affected me very deeply. I was humbled by the knowledge that I had temporarily eased this family's loneliness and anguish as they cared for their child so far from home in an unfamiliar country.

I will not pretend to you that this is an everyday occurrence, but neither is it anomalous. Not too long ago, I began scheduling extra visits apart from my regular Thursday morning story visits in the oncology/hematology ward to drop in on a patient elsewhere in the hospital -again because another nurse had asked me to. This child was unable to so much as roll over in bed so pervasive and severe were the injuries. This patient could hardly even speak clearly but loved to have visitors read stories. For me to make a slight adjustment in my schedule for the sake of this child was one of the easiest and quickest decisions I have ever made in my professional career.

I understand that many of the decisions you make as a member of the library board are extremely difficult in these trying economic times. However I think if you revisit the decision to shut down library service at the Hospital for Sick Children you will eventually come to agree that there must certainly be less difficult decisions to make.

Of late, partially as a result of H1N1, but also for other reasons, there has been a significant increase in the number of inpatients who are confined to their rooms for long stretches of their stay. TPL's afternoon ward visits are the only chance many of them have to access new and up to date books and audiobooks. Our circulation in the wards has increased steadily and I regularly circulate between 30 and 60 books in one or two hours seeing roughly 80 to 100 patients in that time. This does not include the regular in house circulation at the Reading Room! Moreover it is asking too much to expect our partners in the Toronto District School board to pick up the slack as they have their own responsibilities. I must also ask you to consider that a significant portion of the patients are preschoolers, infants and toddlers. If TPL does not provide library service for them who will? The Women's Auxiliary no longer supports collection development at the Reading Room and the TDSB is not mandated to acquire resources or provide library service to children who are not of school age.

I have worked in several full time positions in three different urban library systems including TPL. The part time work I now do at Sick Kids is without any doubt the most valuable service for the money that I have ever been privileged to deliver for TPL or any other library system. I urge you to reconsider the value of this service to the people of Toronto and the impression it makes on those who come from all around the world to stay or work at Sick Kids.

Sincerely,
[via email]
Pat Gracey, Children's Librarian
Hospital For Sick Children / Toronto Public Library