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Health Literacy Introduction

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Introduction to Health Literacy

By Caroline Marshall and Michelle Eberle

Health literacy affects everyone. The Institute of Medicine defines health literacy as "the degree to which individuals have the capacity to obtain, process and understand basic health information and services needed to make appropriate health decisions". More recent definitions focus on specific skills needed to navigate the health care system and the importance of clear communication between health care providers and their patients. Both health care providers and patients play important roles in health literacy.

Health Literacy affects the ability to navigate the healthcare system and care for one's health and the health of family and friends. One in three patients has basic or below basic health literacy. Solutions to health literacy need to address how to:

- Encourage patients to ask questions.
- Support clear communication between patients and providers.
- Create and provide forms and patient materials that are easy-to-understand.
- Help patients provide complete health history to providers.
- Support better management of chronic disease.

There are different kind of literacy including prose, document and quantitative. Patients need to read and understand patient education materials (prose), sign consent forms (document) and take medications (quantitative). For example, patients who suffer from diabetes, need to be able to read about the illness to cope (prose), to track their blood sugar levels (document) and manage medications (quantitative). Another issue for health literacy is understanding risk. Providers need to help patients understand the probability of risk for health conditions and treatments with clear communication.

Limited health literacy is both costly and dangerous. It can result in:

- Medication and treatment errors
- Increased emergency room visits
- Less compliance with treatment
- Lack of preventative screenings
- General poor health

All of us experience issues with health literacy at some point in our lives. The stress and worry of illness can make navigating the health care environment difficult for even the most educated and literate. Additionally, during each stage of life people experience the need for new health information and skills. For example, think of the diverse health information needs of teenagers, new parents, the middle aged, older adults or caregivers for the elderly.

Support Health Literacy

Use the following techniques to increase health literacy:

1) Teach health literacy principles. Use teachable moments to share techniques.
2) Encourage patients to ask questions. Have patients tell you what you just told them to make sure they understand your treatment instructions.
3) Use plain language. Slow down. Limit instructions.
4) Design easy-to-read materials. Write and use materials at or below 6th grade level.
5) Offer a brown bag medication review.
6) Use health education materials effectively. Get patient feedback.
7) Welcome patients with helpful attitude and signs.
8) Support Adult Basic Education.
9) Form or join a health literacy team.
10) Use health and literacy resources in the community especially the local library.

Learn more. Raise awareness. Act now.

National Action Plan for Health Literacy
http://www.health.gov/communication/HLActionPlan/

AHRQ Universal Precautions Toolkit
http://www.ahrq.gov/qual/literacy/

Simply Put, A Guide for Creating Easy-to-Understand Materials
http://www.cdc.gov/healthliteracy/pdf/Simply_Put.pdf

Plain Language Thesaurus
http://depts.washington.edu/respcare/public/info/Plain_Language_Thesaurus_for_Health_Communications.pdf

Health Literacy OutLoud Podcasts
http://www.healthliteracyoutloud.com/

Helen Osborne, Health Literacy from A-Z: Practical Ways to Communicate Your Health Message. Massachusetts: Jones and Bartlett Learning, 2012.

AMA, Health Literacy and Patient Safety: Help Patients Understand, 2nd edition
http://www.ama-assn.org/ama1/pub/upload/mm/367/healthlitclinicians.pdf

Health Literacy, Health Communication, and e-Health. http://www.health.gov

MedlinePlus: How to Write Easy-to-Read Materials http://www.nlm.nih.gov/medlineplus/etr.html

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