



Health Literacy Challenges

By Henry Tam

Health literacy is defined in Healthy People 2010, 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.

Health literacy emerges in the relationship between patients and health care providers. Helen Osborne, M.Ed., OTR/L, president of Health Literacy Consulting, a founder of Health Literacy Month said, “true health literacy is when patients (anyone on the receiving end of the health communication) and providers (anyone on the giving end of health communication) truly understand one another.”

Mutual Understanding is Key

According to the Health Resources and Services Administration (HRSA), patient’s health literacy may be affected if they

have low educational skills, cultural barriers to health care, limited English proficiency or have health care providers who use words the patients don’t understand. Denise Geolot, RN, PhDRN, PhD, Director for HRSA’s Center for Quality said, “the problem of limited health literacy is greatest among older patients, especially those with diminished capacity because of stress, those who are poor, people with limited education, minority populations and persons with limited English proficiency.” The U.S. Department of Education’s 2003 National Assessment of Adult Literacy (NAAL), found that 36 percent of the adult U.S. population has only basic or below basic health literacy levels. And, according to the American Medical Association (AMA) Foundation, a recent government study estimates that over 89 million American adults have limited health literacy skills.

Why Health Literacy Matters

Low health literacy can create problems and inefficiencies in health care. It affects what happens during a medical appointment, after the visit, and whether it even takes place at all. During an appointment, a person who is not health literate may find “it is difficult to share personal and health information with the provider and that is key in order for the provider to care for you; you have to be able to express what is wrong with you,” Geolot said. It is important to communicate information such as the symptoms, medical histories, allergies, current medications, etc. in order for the provider to determine the best approach to care. In addition, after an appointment, patients need to fully understand their own responsibilities. “It’s important because it is difficult to engage in self care and chronic disease management unless you are health literate and understand what you are supposed to do.” It is vital to understand patient responsibilities such as medication regimens and how to monitor blood pressure, blood sugar levels or cholesterol readings, in order to maintain a high quality of self care.

Health literacy is significant for patients’ everyday lives. Geolot stressed that “it is important to adopt health promoting behaviors such as exercise, eating a healthy diet and acting on health-related news and announcements.” Health literacy skills can effect how often a person exercises, what they eat, how often they get physical check-ups, obtain dental care, eye examinations and other health screenings.

Individuals with low health literacy skills might not even receive proper care because it can be difficult to locate providers and seek preventive care. They may discover it is too difficult to find a specialist in today’s complex healthcare environment. Those who are not able to locate providers and services run the risk of their situation worsening if they do not know how to properly manage their chronic health conditions and may even seek questionable health treatments that place themselves at risk. They may also contribute to inefficiencies by making unnecessary doctor visits or seeking care at a hospital for conditions that could be handled just as effectively and met cost effectively at a physician’s office.

The University of Connecticut’s *Low Health Literacy: Implications for National Health Policy* report identifies health literacy as a major source of economic inefficiency in the U.S. health care system. The policy stated “an initial approximation places the order of magnitude of the cost of low health literacy to the U.S. economy in the range of \$106 billion to \$238 billion annually.” The future costs of low health literacy, that result from current actions or lack of action in present day costs, range from \$1.6 trillion to \$3.6 trillion.



How Health Care Professionals Can Help Improve Patient Health Literacy:

- Identify patients with limited literacy levels
- Use simple language, short sentences and define technical terms
- Supplement instruction with appropriate materials (videos, models, pictures, etc.)
- Ask patients to explain your instructions (teach-back method) or demonstrate the procedure
- Ask questions that begin with “how” and “what,” rather than closed-ended yes/no questions
- Organize information so that the most important points stand out and repeat this information
- Reflect the age, cultural, ethnic and racial diversity of patients
- For Limited English Proficiency (LEP) patients, provide information in their primary language
- Improve the physical environment by using lots of universal symbols
- Offer assistance for completing forms

Source: HRSA

AMA and AMA Foundation Resources:

Since 2000, the AMA and the AMA Foundation have been providing educational tools for physicians and their staff to maximize patient understanding, improve the quality of care they provide and reduce health care costs, which include the following resources:

- Health literacy kit with an instructional DVD and manual for clinicians
- Health literacy report "Assessing the nation's health literacy: Key concepts and findings of the National Assessment of Adult Literacy (NAAL)"
- Health literacy textbook *Understanding Health Literacy: Implications for Medicine and Public Health*
- Patient safety monograph "Reducing the Risk by Designing a Safer, Shame-Free Health Care Environment"
- Patient safety tip card "Safe Communication Universal Precautions"

Visit the AMA's Web site at <http://www.ama-assn.org/ama/pub/category/8115.html> to download or purchase these resources.



Good questions for your good health:

1. What is my main problem?
2. What do I need to do?
3. Why is it important for me to do this?

Asking these questions can help me:

- Take care of my health
- Prepare for medical tests
- Take my medicines the right way

Source: National Patient Safety Foundation's Ask Me 3™

Health Literacy Consulting's Osborne said health literacy has been an issue for a long time, but is relevant today because of the changes in health care. "People are in hospitals for less time, appointments are shorter and there are more things patients and families are taking responsibility for whether they choose to do so or not." Health care today rarely includes the doctor house call and does not end when the patient leaves the hospital or clinic. "The only way to follow through correctly is to know what you are doing; to have a true understanding of what is the matter with you; why you need the intervention, whether it is medication, a piece of equipment or a lifestyle change; and how it can help you and your life and what you need to do for that," Osborne said. "So the burden has shifted in many ways to patients and families being responsible for the care in ways that years ago providers used to assume that responsibility."

Mutual Communication

Health literacy should be stressed as the mutual communication between patients and health care providers because even individuals with basic or high health literacy levels can have a hard time understanding health information if health care providers don't communicate clearly with them. Health care providers should make sure patients understand all the information they are receiving because patients may hide their lack of understanding due to embarrassment or intimidation. HRSA's Geolot said a sign of low health literacy is "if somebody is handed a form and is unable to [understand] it or fill it out and uses an excuse like, 'I left my glasses at home so I am not able to fill this out;' that is an indication for the provider. One good way of determining whether somebody is health literate is to provide instructions and then ask the patient to repeat back what they have heard the health care provider say."

Both parties in this communication process can improve their skills. Patients can turn to online resources like WebMD.com or forums moderated by health care professionals to learn more about general health care topics. Acquiring more information would allow them to ask the proper questions when they visit any health care provider or service. For providers, Web-based courses are also available. HRSA offers a course that "focuses on health literacy, cultural confidence and limited English proficiency; it is a web based course that individuals who are interested in health literacy or health professionals can take." It gives examples of the significance and the importance of health literacy and its relationship to promoting the quality of care," Geolot said. The Internet as a resource is useful but it has its limitations because "people have to be able to access [it] and use it appropriately and be able to discriminate what is useful, relevant, appropriate and true for them; they also need a high level of literacy skills, reading skills and the physical acumen to be able to use the technology," Osborne said.



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Health care professionals can help by first identifying if they have patients with limited health literacy levels and improving the communication process overall to ensure mutual understanding. They can use different supplements to overcome any barriers created by limited English proficiency. “There are all sorts of things for patients. There are pictures if they are not English proficient. There are pictures to represent symptoms. There are cards that indicate what language they speak so an interpreter can be brought in to help interpret what they are saying to the provider,” Geolot noted.

Many other resources are available to both patients and health care providers. Individuals and healthcare providers need to address whether health literacy is an issue with them

and take the necessary actions to improve the communication process if it is an issue. Osborne recognizes health literacy is an important issue today because “we have more and more people from other languages and lands, we have an aging population, we have people who are struggling to understand information for a variety of reasons and all those challenges are coming all at once.”

For more information on Health Literacy Consulting, visit www.healthliteracy.com. Health Literacy Consulting President Helen Osborne recently launched podcasts which can be found at www.healthliteracyoutloud.com. For more information on HRSA’s resources, visit www.hrsa.gov/healthliteracy/.



Tips for Safer Surgery:

What you should know - What you can do

Millions of people have surgery each year. Every surgery has risks, but we know there are some that can be prevented. What does this mean to you as a patient? If your doctors and nurses follow some simple steps, you will have a shorter and safer hospital stay.

Questions to Ask Your Doctors and Nurses Before Surgery

One way you can help lower your risk for problems from your surgery is to talk with a member of your surgical care team before surgery about the type of care you should receive. Your care team includes your surgeon, your anesthesiologist and your nurses.

To avoid infection—

If I need antibiotics before surgery, when will I receive the antibiotic and for how long?

Antibiotics should be given within 60 minutes before surgery and should be stopped within 24 hours in most cases. Given properly, antibiotics can greatly lower your chances of getting an infection after surgery.

If hair needs to be removed from the part of my body that is having surgery, what will you use?

Your doctor or nurse should use clippers to remove hair if needed at the site of your surgery. Using a razor to remove hair before surgery can cause infections because of the risk of leaving small cuts on the skin.

To avoid blood clots—

What will you do to prevent blood clots?

Blood clots can lead to heart attacks and strokes. When you have surgery, you are at risk of getting blood clots because you do not move while under anesthesia. The more complicated your surgery, the higher your risk. Your doctor will know your risk for blood clots and steps that will help prevent them, such as giving you the right medicine before surgery.

To avoid heart attacks—

If I take medicine for heart disease, should I keep taking it?

Taking certain medicines together can cause problems. Tell your doctor about all the medicines you are taking, including over-the-counter things like aspirin and herbal remedies. Your doctor or nurse will tell you which medicines you should continue to take and which medicines you should stop taking before surgery.

Other Information

- Tell your doctor about other medical problems you may have, such as allergies or diabetes. These problems could affect your surgery and treatment.

- Patients who smoke are more likely to get infections. Talk to your doctor about how you can quit.
- If you do not see them do so, ask your care team members to wash their hands before examining you.
- Speak up if you have questions or concerns. If you don't understand, ask again. It's your body and you have a right to know.

Other Resources

- For information on preparing for surgery, please visit <http://www.ahrq.gov/consumer/surgery/surgery.htm>, which offers additional questions to ask your physician and surgeon about your surgery.
- For information on quality of hospital care, visit Hospital Compare at <http://www.hospitalcompare.hhs.gov>. It includes information on how often hospitals provide some of the recommended care to get the best results for most patients.
- For information on the Joint Commission's Speak Up™ program, which includes safety tips for surgical patients and infection prevention, visit www.jointcommission.org/PatientSafety/SpeakUp.
- For patient information concerning anesthesia, please visit <http://www.asahq.org/patientEducation.htm>.
- For more information concerning surgery, visit the American College of Surgeons at http://www.facs.org/public_info/ppserv.html.
- If you have additional questions, please contact your doctor.

About SCIP

SCIP is a multi-year national campaign partnership of leading public and private healthcare organizations aimed at reducing surgical complications by 25 percent by the year 2010. SCIP is sponsored by the Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services (CMS) in collaboration with a number of other national partners serving on the steering committee, including the American Hospital Association (AHA), Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), Institute for Healthcare Improvement (IHI), Joint Commission on Accreditation of Healthcare Organizations (JCAHO) and others.

Source: Courtesy of the Surgical Care Improvement Project Partnership.