

Understanding Health Literacy: Why It Is So Important and What Librarians Can Do to Help

Presented by Kelli Ham, MLIS, Consumer Health Coordinator for the National Network of Libraries of Medicine for the Pacific Southwest Region, August 14, 2008.

Health Literacy Overview

American Medical Association Foundation Videos

"Low health literacy: You can't tell by looking," features actual physicians and office staff interacting with real patients challenged by low health literacy. The 2007 video, "Health literacy and patient safety: Help patients understand," gives more detailed techniques and specific steps for physicians and their staff on helping patients with limited health literacy. ama-assn.org/ama/pub/category/8035.html

The Health Literacy of America's Adults: Results from the 2003 National Assessment of Adult Literacy (NAAL)

The 2003 National Assessment of Adult Literacy (NAAL) is the first large-scale national assessment in the United States to contain a component designed specifically to measure health literacy—the ability to use literacy skills to read and understand written health-related information encountered in everyday life. nces.ed.gov/naal/health.asp

Organizations

Literacyworks

The California Health Literacy Initiative was launched by California Literacy (now defunct) in 2003 to inform and partner with individuals and organizations to craft solutions that would positively impact the health and well-being of individuals with low literacy skills, their families, and their communities. Literacyworks is now continuing and expanding the original goal of the Initiative through increasing collaborative partnerships and developing understandable health literacy material. Of particular interest is the Health Literacy Summit in February 2008; videos and presentation materials are available for download. literacyworks.org/
cahealthliteracy.org/

American Medical Association Foundation

In 1998, the American Medical Association (AMA) adopted policy recognizing that limited patient literacy affects medical diagnosis and treatment. The AMA Foundation has since been working to raise awareness of health literacy through its toolkits, training materials, videos and other materials. ama-assn.org/ama/pub/category/8115.html

Medical Library Association

- **Health Information Literacy Pages**

Website includes numerous links for information professionals and consumers, including the Deciphering Medspeak series of brochures.

mlanet.org/resources/healthlit/

- **Health Information Literacy Project**

Pilot project description: (Final materials including curriculum due September 2008.)

mlanet.org/resources/healthlit/hil_project.html

Harvard School of Public Health, Health Literacy Studies

Health Literacy Studies conducts research efforts focused on communication and literacy skills. The site is designed for professionals in health and education who are interested in health literacy and provides materials for health professionals, educators and curricula for health literacy programs.

hsph.harvard.edu/healthliteracy/

Information Resources

MedlinePlus

medlineplus.gov (in English and Spanish)

- **Relevant Health Topic Pages** (Click on Health Topics, then use the A-to-Z alphabetical list to go to each page)

- Health Literacy
- Talking With Your Doctor
- Patient Safety
- Health System
- Understanding Medical Research
- Evaluating Health Information

- **Interactive Tutorials**

nlm.nih.gov/medlineplus/tutorial.html

- **Easy-to-Read Materials** nlm.nih.gov/medlineplus/easytoread/all_easytoread.html

- **How to Write Easy-to-Read Materials**

nlm.nih.gov/medlineplus/etr.html

- **Multiple Languages** (Link on home page)

nlm.nih.gov/medlineplus/languages/languages.html

Consumer Health Information in Many Languages

This resource page is a collaboration of the NN/LM Consumer Outreach Librarians. The site uses a Google custom search to find multilingual health information from a select set of known, quality health information providers. This differs from the MedlinePlus collection in that there may not be an English language equivalent for the material.

nnlm.gov/outreach/consumer/multi.html

Healthy Roads Media

Literacy, health-literacy, illness, aging, disability and language are all issues that can pose barriers to obtaining basic health information. This site contains free health education materials in a number of languages and a variety of formats. They are being developed to study the value of these formats in providing health information for diverse populations in a variety of settings.

healthyroadsmedia.org

Plain Language Glossaries and Other Materials

Plain language materials covering several topics.

hsph.harvard.edu/healthliteracy/innovative.html

"Deciphering Medspeak"

Materials to help explain the specialized language of health professionals

mlanet.org/resources/medspeak/

NIH Publications

Many of the NIH Institutes produce health information publications for consumers, including many that are designated as easy-to-read.

nih.gov

Information Rx

Physicians, librarians and other health care professionals can write an "information prescription" for patients, caregivers, and library users.

informationrx.org

An InfoRx toolkit for health science librarians is also available.

nnlm.gov/hip/infoRx/

Communication Tools

Ask Me 3

From the National Patient Safety Foundation, this site provides a simple strategy for better patient/doctor communications. Separate sections are produced for patients and healthcare providers.

npsf.org/askme3/

Agency for Healthcare Research and Quality (AHRQ)

Health Literacy [webinar] August 2008 - This material is based on content from the National Institutes of Health, the National Library of Medicine and other web resources and has been adapted by Kelli Ham for the Infopeople Project [infopeople.org], supported by the U.S. Institute of Museum and Library Services under the provisions of the Library Services and Technology Act, administered in California by the State Librarian and funded by the National Library of Medicine under contract no. N01-LM-1-3517 with the NN/LM Pacific Southwest Region, UCLA Louise M. Darling Biomedical Library. Any use of this material should credit the author and funding sources.

AHRQ provides excellent resources to help consumers and patients be an active participant in their own healthcare. The Consumer section of the website includes many resources on patient safety, preparing for surgery and other relevant topics.

ahrq.gov/consumer/

The Questions Are the Answer campaign from AHRQ is a fun and informational program to help patients ask the right questions of their healthcare providers, with the goal of better health outcomes.

ahrq.gov/questionsaretheanswer

KidsHealth

KidsHealth from the Nemours Foundation includes health information for kids, teens and parents, including information on talking with your child's doctor.

kidshealth.org

kidshealth.org/parent/general/sick/talk_doctor.html

National Center for Complementary and Alternative Medicine

In a recent survey of adults age 50+, two out of three reported using some form of complementary and alternative medicine (CAM), yet only one in three discussed it with their health care providers. Patients and their health care providers need to talk openly about all of their health care practices. NCCAM created "Time to Talk" to inform consumers about the importance of telling their doctors about their use of CAM therapies.

nccam.nih.gov

nccam.nih.gov/timetotalk/

NIHSeniorHealth

NIHSeniorHealth provides a topic called Talking with your Doctor, which includes information of interest to older adults.

nihseniorhealth.gov/talkingwithyourdoctor/toc.html

National Institutes on Aging

NIA produces many excellent publications, including topics such as Safety and Your Medical Care. Most are available for free, either as a download or by ordering a print copy. For the full list: nia.nih.gov/HealthInformation/Publications/

The 48-page booklet "Talking With Your Doctor" is an excellent guide for older adults.

nia.nih.gov/HealthInformation/Publications/TalkingWithYourDoctor/

Spanish version:

niapublications.org/pubs/conversando/index.asp

Further Reading

Institute of Medicine. Lynn, et al, editors. *Health Literacy: A Prescription to End Confusion*, Nielson-Bohman, Washington, D.C. 2004.

Seminal report on the issue of health literacy in the United States.

Osborne, Helen. *Health Literacy from A to Z: Practical Ways to Communicate Your Health Message*, Jones and Bartlett Publishers, Sudbury, Massachusetts, 2005.

Intended for use in a healthcare environment. Nonetheless, the book is full of practical tips and strategies for communicating complicated information in simple, understandable ways.

Zarcadoolas, Christina et al. *Advancing Health Literacy: A Framework for Understanding and Action*, Jossey-Bass, San Francisco, California 2006.

Written to address issues of health literacy from a public health perspective. Includes sections on health information via mass media and the Internet, cultural literacy, and provides detailed guidelines on creating and evaluation health communication materials.

About the Health e-Shows Series

In working with Infopeople, the California State Library, public libraries and other who provide health information to the public, we are continually reminded that the need for health information continues to grow. People are confronted with more information than ever before, and libraries can provide services and resources to help people make sense of it all and make good decisions about their health. This series covers a variety of topics related to best practices and best resources for providing health information services to patrons.

Your comments and suggestions are welcome!

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