



The Importance of Recognizing and Addressing Limited Health Literacy

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Learning objectives

Attendees will be able to:

- Contrast effective and limited health literacy (LHL)
- Describe consequences of LHL
- Recommend approaches to effectively combat LHL in clinical settings
- Describe effective approaches for institutions to address LHL
- Describe the impact of limited digital literacy on healthcare

Adult literacy in the US

- 130 MILLION (54% of 16-74 yo's) read at less than a 6th grade level; 43 M read below 3rd grade level
- Getting everyone's literacy up to at least a 6th grade level is estimated to generate \$2.3 T (10% GDP) / yr
- Familial impact on younger generations
- Work ability – link to economic disadvantage
- Numeracy *vs.* literacy – major issue of equity

National Action Plan, Barbara Bush Foundation for Family Literacy

What is Personal Health Literacy? Definition

Personal health literacy is the degree to which individuals have the ability to find, understand, and use information and services to inform health-related decisions and actions for themselves and others.

Healthy People 2030; www.health.gov/healthypeople2030

Key determinants of Health Literacy

- At least two people involved – speaker, listener, perhaps others
- Being told the same thing with different words by different people can be confusing
- Speaker's conviction / effort / style have an impact
- Body language can be important or misleading
- Distractions, fear, trust influence effective communication

What is Organizational Health Literacy?

Organizational health literacy is the degree to which organizations equitably enable individuals to find, understand, and use information and services to inform health-related decisions and actions for themselves and others.

Technological approaches are being used increasingly, so internet access for the community is extremely important.

Healthy People 2030: www.health.gov/healthypeople2030

What is Impaired/Limited Health Literacy?

- The failure to understand what is being communicated in a particular healthcare setting
- LHL is NOT totally dependent on education level
- Very common, occurring in a variety of settings
- Related to literacy in general and social determinants of health; pharmacies are important, as are other social services providers

Healthy People 2030-- www.health.gov/healthypeople2030

Why is the recognition of LHL so important?

- Patients / families need to understand communications in order to participate in their health care decisions and plans
- Ability to carry out instructions depends on understanding
- Improving understanding leads to improved outcomes
- Understanding of current health status, future risks
- Family support, understanding, satisfaction

Center for Health Care Statistics, Fact sheets

What are the costs of LHL?

- LHL is estimated to cost \$106 – 238 BILLION (2007) which could now be \$1.6 – 3.6 TRILLION going forward
- Patient frustration and misunderstanding hard to quantify
- Poor health outcomes are measurable, expensive and wasteful
- Failure to understand discussions may lead patients to stay away from providers

Vernon J *et al.* 2007; Low Health Literacy: Implications for National Health Policy

Who pays these costs of LHL?

- Expensive health care in general
- Individuals – poor outcomes, poor understanding
- Health institutions – over-use, readmissions
- Insurers / subscribers – poor outcomes, higher utilization
- Taxpayers and communities (*ie*, excessive 911 calls)

Who does LHL affect, when and how?

- Patients often don't know what they have and are supposed to do -- so then they do nothing
- Any healthcare setting is at risk, especially with forms
- Many patients are reluctant to admit they don't understand
- Dissatisfaction and blame of care providers are common

What are Health Literacy Universal Precautions?

- You can't tell by looking who has LHL – assume it affects all
- **Only 12% of US adults have literacy skills sufficient to fully understand health communications in all settings**
- The LHL may be an issue in only certain settings
- Often helpful for a second person to listen and take notes for better understanding after the discussion

AHRQ toolkit: www.ahrq.gov/health-literacy/improve/precautions/index.html

Literacy, spoken language, education level

- People vary in how they like to learn and how they best learn / understand – always ask their preferences
- Speaking a foreign language doesn't guarantee literacy
- Must always check “did you get it?”
- Certain situations, esp. stress, can paralyze understanding

What is “plain language”?

- Medical jargon is hard for many to understand
- “Plain language” uses common words, and is often attributed to “4th or 5th grade level”, but it’s hard for a speaker to know
- **“Don’t use 3-syllable words”** is easier to use when speaking
- Current issues are important, but health concepts are also crucial to explain

Plain Language Thesaurus: <https://stacks.cdc.gov/view/cdc/11500/>

How can an individual caregiver address LHL?

- Recognize the importance of clear and effective communication
- Follow cues for best understanding, read body language
- Avoid “medical jargon” and use pictures and demonstrations
- Utilize the Teach-back Method to assess understanding – put the burden on yourself (did I explain it well?) rather than on the patient (did you understand what I said?)

www.ahrq.gov/health-literacy/improve/precautions/index.html

Use of the “Ask me 3” approach

- Almost everyone has trouble remembering more than 3 items, especially when stressed. These questions need answers (even if not vocalized) in all healthcare encounters:
- What is my main problem (both in general and today)?
- What do I need to do?
- Why is it important for me to do this / these things?

Simple words – breast self-exams

- “You need to do regular breast self-examinations, looking for lesions, before a cancer has metastasized” *vs.*
- “Every woman has the risk of breast cancer, and it’s very important to find it early, before it has spread. That’s when it’s most treatable. My nurse will show you how to do the exam and explain what we’re trying to find. I need you to do them each month and let us know right away if you find a new lump.”

More examples of simplifying your speech

- “Your malignancy has metastasized” *vs.* “the cancer has spread”
- “We had to start him on a ventilator due to his pulmonary edema” *vs.* “Fluid built up in his lungs, so we had to use a breathing machine”
- “Take it twice a day on an empty stomach” *vs.* “Take one pill before eating, every morning and every night”
- “She has severe renal failure” *vs.* “Her kidneys have stopped working”
- “He’s not responding to therapy” *vs.* “The medicines aren’t working”

Hesitancy to acknowledge lack of understanding

- People with limited literacy are often very reluctant to admit it
- Constant fear of “being discovered”
- Can be a VERY important problem related to consent forms
- Affects spoken and written health communication

How can an institution address LHL?

- Establish an open, shame - free, helpful environment / culture *vs.* “We’ve gone over this several times” -- which seems critical
- Repeatedly demonstrate support of EVERY patient
- Watch for cues that a patient is struggling with forms – “Can I help you with that?” *vs.* “Wow, this sure is taking quite a while”
- Offer (and provide) personal communication helpers
- Provider patience is crucial; never appear exasperated

Farmanova E et al. Jour Health Care Org, Prov & Finan 2018; 55: 1-17

What are the institutional benefits?

- Patients are more likely to return as instructed if they feel welcomed and supported
- Better outcomes – patients are more likely to follow instructions
- Better satisfaction, better word-of-mouth recommendations, and fewer lawsuits
- Fewer readmissions with their potential fines

What is Digital Literacy?

The ability to use information and communication technologies to find, evaluate, create, and communicate information, requiring both cognitive and technical skills.

It's a MAJOR community issue.

“Definitions” National Digital Inclusion Alliance

Digital Health Equity (the “digital divide”)

- Those who have access to the internet, have a device to access it, and knowledge how to use both show digital literacy
- Health information is widely available on the internet (? true)
- Institutions depend on electronic communication with patients
- Is this the newest social determinant of health?

Take-home messages



- Put effort into communicating effectively with everyone
- This doesn't have to take more time, but it improves quality of care, outcomes & satisfaction
- Effective communication does NOT mean just talking louder & slower (don't be condescending)
- Have patients show / tell what they understand & plan to do
- Digital literacy is important for patients – assess it!

Resources

- AMA videos on HL AMA Foundation – amafoundation.org (especially www.youtube.com/watch?v=cGtTZ_vxjyA) Excellent for organizations!
- CDC Health Literacy website: <https://www.cdc.gov/healthliteracy/index.html>
- Center for Healthcare Strategies. Fact Sheets 2013 www.chcs.org
- Emergency Broadband Benefit @ Federal Communication Commission (fcc.gov)
- Farmanova E *et al.* Organizational Health Literacy: Review of Theories, Frameworks, Guides, and Implementation Issues. *Journal Health Care Organiz Provis & Fin* 2018; 55:1-17
- Health Literacy from A to Z: Practical Ways to Communicate Your Health Message
- Health Literacy Universal Precautions toolkit -- www.ahrq.gov/health-literacy/improve/precautions/index.html
- Healthy People 2030 (www.health.gov/healthypeople2030)

Resources II

- Institute for Healthcare Improvement:
<http://www.ihl.org/resources/Pages/AudioandVideo/WIHIHealthLiteracy.aspx>
- National Action Plan 2021 – Barbara Bush Foundation for Family Literacy
<http://www.barbarabushfoundation.org>
- National Center for Education Statistics: <https://nces.ed.gov/naal/>
- National Digital Inclusion Alliance: <http://www.digitalinclusion.org/definitions>
- Plain Language Thesaurus: <https://stacks.cdc.gov/view/cdc/11500/>
- Vernon J *et al.* 2007; Low Health Literacy: Implications for National Health Policy.
https://hsrc.himmelfarb.gwu.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1173&context=sphhs_policy_facpubs