

UNIT NO. 6

HEALTH LITERACY – ENHANCING PHYSICIAN SKILLS

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ABSTRACT

The scope of health literacy demanded of the present day health services user is broad. Enhancing physician skills consists of improving on 6 things: Recognise and assist patients with low literacy to overcome their information handling problems; Improve usability of health information; Improve the usability of health services; Build knowledge to improve health decision making; Advocate for health literacy in your organisation; and Learn more about health literacy.

Keywords:

low literacy; information handling; decision making; “teach-back” method; advocate; healthcare organisation.

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INTRODUCTION

The definition of health literacy and broad concepts has been described in Unit 4 and the application of healthy literacy principles has been described in Unit 5. In this Unit, the focus is on enhancing physician skills in health literacy.

The Scope of health literacy demanded of the present day health services user

There are several abilities needed, namely the ability to:

- Navigate the health system, such as filling out complex forms and locating providers and services
- Share personal information, such as health history, with providers
- Engage in self-care and chronic-disease management
- Understand mathematical concepts such probability and risk
- Calculate cholesterol and blood sugar levels, measuring medications, and understanding nutrition labels and choosing between health plans also require the ability to calculate
- Know health topics including parts of the body structure, function, normality, and abnormality; relationship between lifestyle factors such as diet and exercise and various health outcomes.

Enhancing the physician’s tasks and skills in the context of health literacy

- Recognise and assist patients with low literacy to overcome their information handling problems
- Improve usability of health information
- Improve the usability of health services
- Build knowledge to improve health decision making
- Advocate for health literacy in your organisation
- Learn more about health literacy.

RECOGNISE AND ASSIST PATIENTS WITH LOW LITERACY

Clues that a patient may have inadequate health literacy include bringing a family member to the clinic visit or wanting to discuss materials with the family, claims of forgetting reading glasses, incompletely or inadequately filling out forms, or are poorly compliant to medications.

Ways to improve understanding in patients with low health literacy are shown in Table 1.

IMPROVE USABILITY OF HEALTH INFORMATION

Consider the following questions as you develop and deliver health information:

- Is the information appropriate for the users?
- Is the information easy to use?
- Are you speaking clearly and listening carefully?

(I) Is the information appropriate for the users?***Identify the intended users of the health information and services***

Identify the intended users based on epidemiology (who is affected?), demographics, behaviour, culture, and attitude. Be sure the materials and messages reflect the age, social and cultural diversity, language, and literacy skills of the intended users. Recognise the low literacy user who needs more assistance to navigate the health care system.

Table 1. Ways to improve understanding in patients with low health literacy

- Slow down – Take time to assess patient’s health literacy skills
- Use “living room” language instead of medical terminology; use the language that patients can understand.
- Show or draw pictures – Visual aids enhance understanding and subsequent visit.
- Limit information given at each interaction and repeat instructions.
- Use a “teach back” or “show me” approach to confirm understanding – Ask patients to demonstrate their instructions to ensure that instruction has been adequate. Do not ask “Do you understand?” Typically, patients will say yes even if they don’t understand.
- Be respectful, caring and sensitive – This attitude reassures patients and help them to improve participation in their own health care.

Source: Williams, 2002

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Evaluate users' understanding before, during, and after the introduction of information and services.

Talk to members of the intended user group before you design your communication intervention to determine what information they need to know and how they will use it. Then pre-test messages and services to get feedback.

Test your messages after they have been introduced to assess effectiveness. Refine content when necessary. Use a post-test to evaluate the effectiveness of the information.

Acknowledge cultural differences and practice respect

Ensure that health information is relevant to the intended users' social and cultural contexts. Cultural factors to be considered include ethnic group, language, nationality, religion, age, gender, sexual orientation, income level and occupation.

(2) Is the information easy to use?***Limit the number of messages, use plain language, and focus on action.***

Keep it simple. As a general guide, use no more than four main messages. It is good to keep to three messages most of the time. Give the user specific actions and recommendations.

Use plain language. Use everyday language and an active voice. Avoid long or run-on sentences. Avoid jargon and use everyday examples to explain technical or medical terms the first time they are used.

Clearly state the actions you want the person to take. Focus on behaviour rather than the underlying medical principles.

Supplement instructions with visuals

Individual learning styles differ. For many people, visuals are a preferred style, especially for technical information. Simple line drawings can help users understand complicated or abstract medical concepts. Make sure to place images in context of gender and age. When illustrating internal body parts, include the outside of the body so that the user can grasp the context too.

Use visuals to help convey your message and not just decorate, as this will distract users. Show the main message on the front of the visual materials. For print communication, use captions or cues to point out key information.

Make written communication easy to read.

Use at least 12-point font. Avoid using all capital letters, italics, and fancy script. Keep the length between 40 and 50 characters. Use headings and bullets to break up text. Be sure to leave plenty of white space around the margins and between sections.

Improve the usability of information on the Internet.

Studies show that people cannot find the information they seek on Websites about 60 percent of the time. This figure may be higher for persons with limited literacy skills. Use uniform navigation. Organise information to minimise searching and scrolling. Give users the option to navigate from simple to complex information.

(3) Are you speaking clearly and listening carefully?***Ask open ended questions***

Ask questions using the words “what” or “how” instead of those that can be answered with “yes” or “no”. For example, “What questions do you have?” instead of “Do you have any questions?”

Check for understanding

The “teach-back” method is a technique that healthcare providers and consumers can use to enhance communication with each other. The person receiving the health information is asked to restate it in his or her own words – not just repeat it – to ensure that the message is understood and remembered. When understanding is not accurate or complete, the sender repeats the process until the receiver is able to restate the information needed. Users can also be asked to act out a medication regimen.

Participate in plain language and cultural competency training

Encourage colleagues to do the same. Consider organising a training programme for health professionals and staff in your organisation.

IMPROVE THE USABILITY OF HEALTH SERVICES

Navigation of healthcare systems requires familiarity with the vocabulary, concepts and processes needed to access health services and information. This includes understanding insurance coverage and for some eligibility for public assistance, filling out patient information forms, scheduling appointments and follow-up procedures, and locating services.

Strategies to improve the usability of health services include:

- Improve the usability of health forms and instructions.
- Improve the accessibility of the physical environment.
- Establish a patient navigator programme.

(1) Improve the usability of health forms and instructions

Healthcare and public health systems rely heavily on printed materials such as:

- Medical history forms
- Insurance forms
- Informed consent forms
- Test results
- Directions to the laboratory or pharmacy
- Hospital discharge and home care instructions
- Clinical research protocols and announcements.

Tips for improving the usability of health forms and instructions:

- Revise to ensure clarity and simplicity.
- Test forms with intended users and revise as needed.
- Provide plain language forms in multiple languages.
- Provide clear information about eligibility for public assistance.
- Train staff to give assistance with completing forms and scheduling follow-up care.

(2) Improve the accessibility of the physical environment***Tips for improving the physical environment***

- Include universal symbols and clear signage.
- Promote easy flow through healthcare facilities.
- Train staff to create and maintain a respectful and shame-free environment.

(3) Establish a patient navigator programme

Patient navigators are health professionals, community health workers, or highly trained patient liaisons who co-ordinate health care for patients and help them move through the healthcare system. Patient navigators can help patients evaluate their treatment options, obtain referrals, or apply for financial assistance.

BUILD KNOWLEDGE TO IMPROVE HEALTH DECISION MAKING

Strategies to build knowledge and improve health decision making are:

- Improve access to accurate and appropriate health information.
- Facilitate decision making.
- Partner with educators to improve health curricula

(1) Improve access to accurate and appropriate health information

Healthcare and public health professionals can develop plain language health education materials that can be easily shared among practitioners.

Work with the media

Working with the media to improve health literacy involves: Increasing the media's awareness of health literacy issues, and Making scientific and medical information easier to understand by converting the health information into plain language suitable for a public audience.

Develop new methods for information dissemination

Personal electronic devices such as cell phones, and palm pilots could be new ways of reaching out to people.

(2) Facilitate decision making

Decision making hinges on the way we package health information and services.

We can:

Use short documents that present “bottom-line information, step-by-step instructions, and visual cues that highlight the most important information.

Align health information and recommendations with access to services, resources, and support.

(3) Partner with educators to improve health curricula

Co-develop adult basic education lessons on health content with educators.

Partner schools to improve health education materials.

ADVOCATE FOR HEALTH LITERACY IN YOUR ORGANISATION

We can advocate for health literacy in your organisation:

- Make the case for health literacy improvement.
- Incorporate health literacy into mission and planning.
- Establish accountability for health literacy activities.

(1) Make the case for health literacy improvement.

Include health literacy in staff training and orientation activities. Identify specific programmes and projects affected by low literacy.

Target key opinion leaders with health literacy information.

(2) Incorporate health literacy into mission and planning.

Include specific goals and objectives related to improving health literacy in strategic plans, performance plans, programmes, and educational initiatives.

Convene a work group to develop a health literacy agenda for your organisation.

(3) Establish accountability for health literacy activities.

Include health literacy improvement in programme evaluation.

LEARN MORE ABOUT HEALTH LITERACY

There are many sources of information:

- Articles in PubMed.
- On-line courses.
- Local courses such as this Family Practice Skills Course as well as courses conducted by Health Promotion Board.

REFERENCES

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2. US Department of Health and Human Services. Quick Guide to Health Literacy. Office of Disease Prevention and Health Promotion.

LEARNING POINTS

- **The scope of health literacy demanded of the present day health services user is broad.**
- **Enhancing physician skills consists of improving on 6 things:**
 - **Recognise and assist patients with low literacy to overcome their information handling problems;**
 - **Improve usability of health information;**
 - **Improve the usability of health services;**
 - **Build knowledge to improve health decision making;**
 - **Advocate for health literacy in your organisation; and**
 - **Learn more about health literacy.**