Health Literacy Made Simple

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What is Health Literacy?

The Joint Commission uses the federal Agency for Healthcare Research and Quality’s definition:

- The degree to which an individual has the capacity to obtain, process, and understand basic health information and services needed to make appropriate health decisions.
- Not simply the ability to read.
- Requires a complex group of reading, listening, analytical and decision-making skills and the ability to apply these skills to health situations.
- Affected by illness, age, stress, tiredness, mood and diagnosis so can fluctuate over time.
Health Literacy vs Learning Needs Assessment

- The identification of a patient’s health literacy needs builds on the assessment of a patient’s learning needs (PC.02.03.01/EP 1), which includes identifying both potential learning barriers (e.g. any physical limitations affecting learning), and preferred learning methods and modalities (e.g. drawings, models, audio, video).

- In addition to being affected by basic literacy skills (the ability to read/write) and English proficiency, health literacy is also impacted by a patient’s knowledge of: health topics, the body, nature and causes of disease, terminology, and numeracy skills.
Health Literacy

- Everyone, **no matter how educated**, is at risk for misunderstanding health information if the issue is **emotionally charged or complex**.

- In almost all cases, physicians and other health professionals, try to and believe they are, communicating accurate information.

- In some cases, patients may believe they have understood directions, but may be embarrassed to ask questions to confirm their understanding.
Health Literacy Contributors

INDIVIDUAL CAPACITY
- Reading Fluency
  - Prose
  - Quantitative
  - Document
- Prior Knowledge
  - Vocabulary
  - Conceptual knowledge of health and healthcare

HEALTH-RELATED PRINT LITERACY
Ability to understand written health information

HEALTH-RELATED ORAL LITERACY
Ability to orally communicate about health

Complexity and Difficulty of Printed Messages

Other Factors:
- Culture and Norms
- Barriers to change

New Knowledge,
- Positive Attitudes,
- Greater Self-Efficacy,
- Behavior Change

Improved Health Outcomes
EP 30

- The interdisciplinary team identifies the patient’s health literacy needs.

“Note: Health literacy is typically an interactive process, the goal of which is to ascertain the patients capacity to process and understand basic health information needed to make appropriate health decisions”.

EP 31

- Patient education is consistent with the patient’s health literacy needs.
Health Literacy Requirements
Provision of Care Standard 02.03.01

**Intent:** Improve communication between health care professionals and patients (and their families)

**Minimal Compliance:** While neither the use of a specific assessment tool, nor the determination of a health literacy level is required, an interactive process or method must be evident.

**Note:** Although one effective approach to evaluate a patient’s understanding of the education/training provided (PC.02.03.01/EP 25) is to ask the patient to repeat back the instructions in their own words (the “teach-back” technique) and to document confirmation in the clinical record, using that approach alone is not sufficient for compliance.
Identifying Health Literacy Needs

- There is no clear “consensus” on a health literacy measurement but a convergence to more comprehensive tools. There is a trend towards a mixed measurement (self-report and direct test) of health literacy.

- Although a number of reading- and comprehension-assessment tools are available, there is debate whether or not these tools should be used clinically.

- People with low literacy skills already feel stigmatized and fear exposure of their inability to read, may elect to go elsewhere for their care if a formal literacy test becomes part of the routine care.
Identifying Health Literacy Needs

- Knowing how to assess patients’ ability to read and understand health information is essential if we are to identify the most vulnerable patients who most need help addressing their low health literacy.

- Evidence suggests that this is best done by using appropriate assessment questions and looking for behavioral clues.

- This approach engages the entire interdisciplinary team.
Identifying Health Literacy Needs

Asking the following targeted questions can help identify low health literacy:

- “Medical terms are complicated and many people find the words difficult to understand. Do you ever get help from others in filling out forms, reading prescription labels, insurance forms, or health education sheets?”

- “A lot of people have trouble reading and remembering health information because it is difficult. Is this ever a problem for you?”
Another way to assess for low health literacy is to ask patients to read their prescription bottles and then explain how to take their medication.
Identifying Health Literacy Needs

- Most people with low literacy skills are masters at concealing their deficit and are often quite articulate in speaking, so it is difficult to realize that a problem exists.

- However, observing closely and asking the right questions will provide ‘red flags’ that a problem exists with reading and comprehending information.
There are a number of characteristics and behaviors that patients with low health literacy exhibit:

- Patients often **make excuses** when asked to read or fill out forms. Examples include: “I don’t have my glasses,” “I’m too tired to read,” and “I’ll read this when I get home.”

- Patients may provide an **incomplete medical history**. Registration forms may have many blanks.
Patients with low health literacy become skilled at listening and they often take instructions literally to avoid mistakes.

To identify their medications they look at the pills for color, size, and shape, since they can’t read the labels.

Watching for these behavioral clues of low health literacy combined with asking the right questions can pay large dividends in terms of improving healthcare for patients.
Formal Health Literacy Tools

The Newest Vital Sign: This is a 3-minute test in English and Spanish where the person is given an ice cream nutrition label and asked six questions about it. It assesses document and number literacy

Formal Health Literacy Tools

The Rapid Estimate of Adult Literacy in Medicine—Short Form (REALM-SF) This is a 7-item word recognition test to provide clinicians with a valid quick assessment of patient health literacy. It checks word recognition and reading but not understanding of numbers.

http://www.hsph.harvard.edu/healthliteracy/files/2012/09/doakappendicies
Formal Health Literacy Tools

A single question: “How confident are you filling out medical forms by yourself?” This question may be useful for detecting patients with inadequate health literacy, although it has only been evaluated in selected settings.

http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC2324160/?tool=pubmed
Keys to Success Identifying Health Literacy Needs

- Work as a team to develop a consistent process / policy for assessing health literacy.
- Document the results of the patient’s health literacy assessment in a prominent place in the medical record.
- Build into the patient flow the need to assess health literacy prior to providing care, treatment and education.
- Match the delivery of information and education to the patient’s health literacy.
Health Literacy Additional Resources

- Health Resources and Services Administration (HRSA)
  [http://www.hrsa.gov/publichealth/healthliteracy](http://www.hrsa.gov/publichealth/healthliteracy)

- National Institute on Health

- Agency for Healthcare Quality and Research

- Health Literacy Precautions Toolkit
  [http://nchealthliteracy.org/toolkit](http://nchealthliteracy.org/toolkit)

- Centers for Disease Control & Prevention - Online Training
  [http://www.cdc.gov/healthliteracy/training/index.html](http://www.cdc.gov/healthliteracy/training/index.html)