

HEALTH LITERACY INTRODUCTION

INTRODUCTION

Health literacy is the ability to “obtain, communicate, process, and understand basic health information and services to make appropriate health decisions” and is a pressing health issue for Americans.¹ One in four Americans has trouble filling out forms at the doctor’s office or understanding medication labels, and the issue may be greater in communities that have linguistic, cultural, or social barriers to adequate levels of health literacy.²

ISSUE

Ensuring that complex health information is understandable accessible to all requires careful planning, skill, and community participation. The use of technical/medical jargon, culturally-insensitive language, and communication styles more suited for academics or professional can alienate and exclude persons who may struggle with English literacy or with scientific or medical terms.³

While many interventions and programs focused on health literacy are based on individual-level actions, it is imperative to note that health literacy is an outcome of the broader surroundings and context the individual resides in, and is not just a result of a personal disability or incapacity. Advocates argue for “public health literacy” policies to complement programs targeted at improving individualistic health literacy, which would address the wider range of social, economic, and political determinants of health that are affected by one’s literacy capabilities. One such example is that improving civic literacy and participation could enable underserved communities to better self-advocate on health issues and to identify forces contributing to health inequities.⁴

Agricultural workers are particularly vulnerable to the structural contributors to low levels of health literacy, such as the need to forgo secondary education in order to provide an income for one’s family; linguistic discrimination against English Language Learners; differing cultural concepts around health and disease; and socioeconomic-driven constraints on the amount of time and energy one has free to spend improving health literacy skills.^{5,6}

SOLUTIONS

¹ Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. (2011). Learn about health literacy. Retrieved from <http://www.cdc.gov/healthliteracy/learn/index.html>

² Doyle, E., Ward, S., & Oomen-Early, J. (2010). Communicating health information in *The process of community health education and promotion*. Long Grove, IL: Waveland Press.

³ Health Resources and Services Administration. (n.d.). About health literacy. Retrieved from <http://www.hrsa.gov/publichealth/healthliteracy/healthlitabout.html>

⁴ Freedman, D., Bess, K., Tucker, H., Boyd, D., Tuchman, A., & Wallston, K. (2009). Public health literacy defined. *American Journal of Preventive Medicine*, 36(5), 446-451.

⁵ Bratt, K. (2007). Violence in the curriculum: Compulsory linguistic discrimination in the Arizona-Sonora borderlands. *Journal for Critical Education Policy Studies*, 5(5). Retrieved from <http://www.iceps.com/print.php?articleID=89>

⁶ Arcury, T., Estrada, J., & Quandt, S. (2010). Overcoming language and literacy barriers in safety and health training of agricultural workers. *Journal of Agromedicine*, 15(3). Doi: 10.1080/1059924X.2010.486958

Potential solutions and strategies for addressing health literacy issues range from simple and short-term to complex and future-minded. Individual-level and community/institution-level strategies are presented below.

Individual-level strategies:⁷

- Present health education information in a culturally-sensitive and simple manner.
- Use visually-descriptive photos, images, and icons that will help “clue-in” a reader.
- Review materials to make sure they are below a 6th grade reading level, and use audio/visual media when possible.

Community-level strategies:⁸

- Take steps to accurately measure the health literacy levels of communities and its impact on both personal and community health status.
- Integrate the broader vision of public health literacy into community health programs, such as including civic participation skills, community empowerment, and critical thinking skills as part of basic health literacy improvement interventions.
- Train health care providers, policy-makers, and other professionals on how to communicate with diverse populations in clear, plain language.⁹

LINKS

American Medical Association: <http://www.ama-assn.org/ama/pub/about-ama/ama-foundation/our-programs/public-health/health-literacy-program.page>

Centers for Disease Control and Prevention: <http://www.cdc.gov/healthliteracy/>

Harvard School of Public Health: <http://www.hsph.harvard.edu/healthliteracy/overview/>

Health Resources and Services Administration (free online course aimed at healthcare professionals): <http://www.hrsa.gov/publichealth/healthliteracy/>

National Action Plan to Improve Health Literacy: http://www.health.gov/communication/hlactionplan/pdf/Health_Literacy_Action_Plan.pdf

⁷ Doyle, E., Ward, S., & Oomen-Early, J. (2010). Communicating health information in *The process of community health education and promotion*. Long Grove, IL: Waveland Press.

⁸ Freedman, D., Bess, K., Tucker, H., Boyd, D., Tuchman, A., & Wallston, K. (2009). Public health literacy defined. *American Journal of Preventive Medicine*, 36(5), 446-451.

⁹ Harvard School of Public Health. (2013). Health literacy studies: Overview. Retrieved from <http://www.hsph.harvard.edu/healthliteracy/overview/>