

Why Health Literacy is Everyone's Business

By Elisheba Muturi-Kihara.

October is Health Literacy Month, and BC's health librarians are celebrating by raising awareness of health literacy. According to the Canadian Council on Learning, "60% of adult Canadians lack the capacity to obtain, understand and act upon health information and services and to make appropriate health decisions on their own." In British Columbia, it is estimated that 54% of adults have low health literacy and lack the skills to manage their health adequately. For a health literacy map of British Columbia, see:

www.ccl-cca.ca/ccflash/healthliteracy/map_british_columbia_e.html

Given the strong link between literacy, education and health status in Canada, the Health Libraries Association of BC (HLABC) encourages health professionals, the public, and librarians everywhere to raise Canada's level of health literacy.¹

In particular, during health literacy month in October, HLABC is encouraging librarians to actively promote awareness of health literacy among health professionals and consumers. According to Helen Osborne, the founder of Health Literacy Month, "October is Health Literacy Month, a time when health literacy advocates around the world promote the importance of making health information understandable. Health Literacy Month is a time of observance when hospitals, health centers, literacy programs, libraries, social service agencies...can work collaboratively to draw attention to, and develop local capacity for, addressing this important issue."

¹ Founded in 1978, HLABC (<http://hlabc.bc.ca/>) is an organization comprising health libraries, their staff, and others interested in health information. HLABC members represent health libraries in hospitals, academic and government environments, non-profit organizations, public libraries and research corporations. HLABC is a regional chapter of the national organization, the Canadian Health Libraries Association.

What is health literacy?

Health literacy generally refers to the ability of individuals to access and use health information to make appropriate health decisions and maintains basic health (Canadian Council on Learning). The elements of general literacy include prose literacy (reading words), document literacy (filling forms) and numeracy (numbers – balancing check books). Health literacy is complex because it requires adults to use all three skills simultaneously- it is more than just reading or understanding numbers. These literacy skills are used for a wide range of daily tasks, such as making healthy lifestyle choices, making informed health related decisions, finding and understanding health and safety information, and locating proper health services.

Why does health literacy matter?

- Large numbers of people using the health care system appear to have low levels of health literacy
- Increasing rates of chronic disease will likely increase need for health literacy skills
- Increasing complexity of the healthcare system and the deluge of health information now available put high demands on people for health literacy skills
- Lower levels of health literacy appear to be related to poorer health outcomes
- Lower levels of health literacy may make it difficult for people to follow prescribed treatment
- Lower health literacy appears to be related to higher health care costs.

Low health literacy may reflect inequities in health conditions and access. Those individuals who are at a disadvantage in society are at greatest risk:

- Seniors
- Recent immigrants
- Ethnic minorities
- Persons with low general literacy
- Unemployed

Addressing health literacy is essential for ensuring the health of our populations and contributing to the

quality, efficiency, effectiveness, safety and sustainability of our health care system.

What can librarians do?

Librarians can promote quality health information resources and assist the public access health information at the appropriate literacy level for each individual. They can also educate health professionals on the importance of plain language communication with patients. Librarians can:

- Compile a fact sheet, emphasizing what patrons (health professionals or the public) can do to enhance health communication and ensure health information is understandable
- Create a themed display of health literacy and plain language health resources
- Compile and disseminate a list of appropriate resources. Plain language toolkits and examples are particularly helpful for health professionals.

What can health professionals do?

Healthcare professionals can ensure that they communicate to patients in a way that patients understand by:

- Simplifying information and illustrations
- Avoiding medical jargon
- Asking patients to repeat instructions to make sure they understand
- Encouraging patients to ask questions
- Following plain language principles in creating all written materials

What can the public do?

Read daily: The strongest determinant of health literacy is the regular practice of a broad range of literacy activities: daily reading of newspapers, books, e-media and magazines can help to keep your brain healthy and active as well as maintain your literacy skills.

Ask questions: Patients are increasingly expected to become more involved in their own health care. So, it is important that all patients ask the right questions about their health and health care, and that they receive information and instructions in a way that they can understand. Patients can ask their care providers three simple questions:

- What is my health problem?
- What do I need to do?
- Why do I need to do this?

(See Manitoba Institute for Patient Safety website: www.safetoask.ca)

Seek reliable information: The saying “you can’t always believe what you read” certainly applies to health information. Canadians should seek out reputable information sources, use the library and verify information with a health-care professional.

Inspire others

Please share your story of promoting health literacy month or other health literacy initiative via e-mail (to Elisheba Muturi, elisheba.muturi@gov.bc.ca) or by posting a comment (<http://shebamuturi.wordpress.com/2009/09/10/bc-health-literacy-initiatives/>)

Resources

Canadian Council of Learning. Health Literacy in Canada: a Healthy Understanding, 2008
<http://www.ccl-cca.ca/CCL/Reports/HealthLiteracy/?Language=EN>

Osborne, Helen. Health Literacy Month
http://www.healthliteracymonth.org/hlmonth_stories.asp

University of Michigan. Improving Health Literacy Research Guide
<http://guides.lib.umich.edu/content.php?pid=30712&sid=383215>

World Education. Health Literacy Special Collection: Print Resources Tools and Resources for Health Literacy Initiatives
<http://healthliteracy.worlded.org/research.htm>

Health literacy and plain language resources
<http://delicious.com/druguseopt/healthliteracy.overview>
<http://delicious.com/druguseopt/readability.assessment>
<http://delicious.com/druguseopt/healthliteracy.test>
<http://delicious.com/druguseopt/healthliteracy.data>
<http://delicious.com/druguseopt/cultural.competence>
<http://delicious.com/druguseopt/plain.language>
<http://delicious.com/druguseopt/plainlanguage.examples>
<http://delicious.com/druguseopt/plainlanguage.symbols>
<http://delicious.com/druguseopt/healthliteracy.patients>
<http://delicious.com/druguseopt/healthliteracy.stories>

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