

HEALTH LITERACY: A PRESCRIPTION TO END CONFUSION

Nearly half of all American adults—90 million people—have difficulty understanding and acting upon health information. The following two examples were selected from the many pieces of complex consumer health information used in America:

- From an informed consent form: *A comparison of the effectiveness of educational media in combination with a counseling method on smoking habits is being examined; and*
- From a consumer privacy notice: *Examples of such mandatory disclosures include notifying state or local health authorities regarding particular communicable diseases.*

Forty million Americans cannot read complex texts like these at all, and 90 million have difficulty understanding complex texts. Yet complex text is very common in health information, from insurance forms to advertising. Even people with strong literacy skills may have trouble obtaining, understanding, and using complex health information: a surgeon may have trouble helping a family member with Medicare forms; a science teacher may not understand information sent by a doctor about a brain function test; and an accountant may not know when to get a mammogram. Health literacy could help end this confusion.

WHAT IS HEALTH LITERACY?

Health literacy is the degree to which individuals can obtain, process, and understand the basic health information and services they need to make appropriate health decisions. But health literacy goes beyond the individual. It also depends upon the skills, preferences, and expectations of health information and care providers: our doctors; nurses; administrators; home health workers; the media; and many others.

WHY IS HEALTH LITERACY IMPORTANT?

Although causal relationships between limited health literacy and health outcomes are not yet established, cumulative and consistent findings suggest such a causal connection. This means that health literacy may affect the health of Americans and the ability of the health care system to provide effective, high-quality health care. Studies have shown that people with low health literacy understand health information less well, get less preventive health care—such as screenings for cancer—and use expensive health services such as emergency department care more frequently.



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IS HEALTH LITERACY ABOUT EDUCATION?

Health literacy is not only about education. A person who has finished high school and knows how to read may still not be able to navigate the health system. Health literacy comes from a convergence of education, cultural and social factors, and health services. While reading, writing, and math skills make up part of the basis of health literacy, many other skills and abilities are also important, such as speaking, listening, having adequate background information, and being able to advocate for oneself in the health system.

WHAT CAN BE DONE ABOUT LOW HEALTH LITERACY?

Research shows that health literacy can be improved. Efforts to improve health literacy in the United States must depend on efforts from all the sectors that contribute to the problem: government; schools; and the health care system. To start reducing the negative effects of limited health literacy, health service providers and people in the community must be knowledgeable, aware, and responsive to the health literacy of patients and consumers. In order to promote a health literate America:

- The Department of Health and Human Services should take the lead in developing uniform standards for addressing health literacy;
- Government and private funders should support the development and use of culturally appropriate new measures of health literacy, as well as multidisciplinary research on the extent, associations, and consequences of limited health literacy;
- Educators should take advantage of opportunities to incorporate health-related tasks, materials, and examples into existing lesson plans;
- Professional schools and continuing education programs in the health fields should incorporate health literacy into their curricula and areas of competence; and
- Health care systems should develop and support demonstration programs to establish effective approaches to reduce the negative effects of limited health literacy.

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Health Literacy: A Prescription to End Confusion is available for sale from the National Academies Press, 500 Fifth St. NW, Washington, DC 20001; call (800) 624-6242 or (202) 334-3313 (in the Washington metropolitan area), or visit the NAP's on-line bookstore at www.nap.edu. For more information about the Institute of Medicine, visit the IOM home page at www.iom.edu. © 2004 by the National Academy of Sciences. Permission is granted to reproduce this report brief in its entirety, with no additions or alterations.