

Healthcare *Literacy*

When it comes to medical information, many patients just don't "get it". And those that don't are often reluctant to say so. The bridge over murky patient/physician communication waters: clear answers to simple questions.



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Health literacy has come to be defined as the ability to read, understand, and effectively use basic medical instructions and information. People unable to meet these basic health literacy criteria are more prone to medication or treatment errors, less able to follow treatments, and generally at higher risk of hospitalization. Recent estimates suggest as many as 90 million Americans may have difficulty understanding health information, resulting in additional health costs exceeding \$50 billion annually.

Considering low functional health literacy

in the context of a medical condition, it could easily be viewed as a public health crisis of epidemic proportions. "That's a good way to frame it," says Barbara DeBuono, MD. "Tackling this issue and improving the ability of patients to understand and act on health information makes them much more likely to know about their disease, manage it, and be motivated around improving their health outcomes. We think in the long run it will also reduce costs. Those individuals who know how to take their medications, for example, will take them properly, get their positive benefits, and won't have the complications or problems that can arise from not taking medications properly."

The National Adult Literacy Survey (NALS) reports that 75% of Americans who had a long-term illness also had limited literacy. According to the Center for Health Care Strategies (CHCS), this may mean these individuals know less about their condition or how to handle symptoms. The CHCS also notes that low literacy patients passing through the emergency room are twice as likely to be hospitalized compared to those

with better comprehending skills. While older people, minorities, immigrants, and lower-income individuals are generally disproportionately more likely to have marginal literacy skills, low literacy in the healthcare setting is not confined by socio-economic boundaries. Paradoxically, medical advances may themselves be contributing to diminished healthcare understanding among those with adequate reading and comprehension skills in other environments.

"Technology is advancing and in many ways that challenges our ability to make it understandable to patients," explains DeBuono. "That is particularly true when you have a population that in some cases might be generally struggling with reading and literacy. But there are many people who have advanced degrees and are great readers, but the information is just presented in a very unclear way using medical jargon and verbiage that is really not accessible to the patients. As technology and peoples' conditions get more complicated, it becomes more difficult for the whole healthcare delivery system to communicate in such a way that

people can both navigate the delivery system as well as understand the very specific instructions they're being given."

In a recent Roper ASW survey, two-thirds of physicians and pharmacists said they regularly or occasionally encounter patients who don't understand their prescription medication instructions. About 90% of these respondents also said most patients have had at least one experience where they thought they understood their medication instructions, but later has trouble remembering or knowing what to do.

While clear understanding of medication instructions was found to be far from universal, the same survey suggests patient reluctance to admit having any difficulty. While only 14% of those polled said they have personally felt awkward admitting they did not understand healthcare information, nearly 80% said that "other people" have felt uncomfortable communicating their lack of understanding to their provider. For the physician trying to assess a patient's level health literacy, Dr. DeBuono cautions that symptoms of poor comprehension can sometimes be silent.

"The initial sense of a provider that a patient is not 'getting it' often comes because the patient is asking questions that clearly indicate a lack of understanding, but sometimes they are not asking anything at all," she says. "The provider can not assume they understand everything simply because they are not asking questions."

From her experience with the develop-

ment of the Ask Me 3 program (see box), Dr. DeBuono suggests a relatively simple communication protocol. "In the clinical situation, the ability to communicate effectively in a short amount of time is getting more and more difficult. After a tremendous amount of clinical input and thought, we reduced our experience to three basic things that need to be covered during the patient/provider interface. If these can be clearly articulated, the patient will at least know more than when they came in. From there, it's really the provider's responsibility to probe, prompt, and ask the patient to explain instructions you've just gone over. It's the method used by the American Medical Association and others when they work with providers around clear health communications – have the patient almost 'teach back' to the provider that which they were just taught themselves."

Providers are also encouraged to create a comfortable environment conducive to conversation, use plain language instead of jargon or technical terms, employ visual models, use language appropriate to the patient's individual background and culture, and offer patient-friendly literature to reinforce any "take-home" messages presented in the clinical setting. The Partnership for Clear Health Communication, developers of the Ask Me 3 program, also recommends that providers make an effort to broaden their knowledge of the health literacy issue. "Low health literacy is the problem," says DeBuono, "and clear health communication is the solution."

Questions For Quality Care

Ask Me 3 promotes three simple but essential questions that patients should ask their provider in every healthcare interaction:

- What is my main problem?
- What do I need to do?
- Why is it important for me to do this?

The questions, checklist, and a reminder form may be drawn down from the Ask Me 3 website. Physicians can refer their patients to www.askme3.org to access these and other resources.

The website offers advice to patients on when to ask questions, whom they should ask, and what to do if they don't understand their provider's answers. This toolkit also provides a patient checklist of tips for clear health communication:

- I will ask the three questions.
- I will bring a friend or family member to help me at my doctor visit.
- I will make a list of my health concerns to tell my doctor.
- I will bring a list of all my medicines when I visit my doctor.
- I will ask my pharmacist for help when I have questions about my medicines.

For More Information

The American Medical Association Foundation now offers its free Health Literacy Educational Kit including:

- A manual for clinicians
- Video documentary
- Re-printable information
- CME credit
- A list of additional education & involvement resources

Go to www.ama-assn.org/ama/pub/category/3119.html

Pfizer Health Literacy Principles is a handbook for creating patient education materials that enhance understanding and promote health outcomes. Included in the publication are lists of frequently used words and phrases that are often misunderstood by patients, with suggested alternatives. The entire publication is available in PDF form and may be downloaded directly from www.pfizer-healthliteracy.com/4548_Health_literacy_all.pdf

The Center for Health Care Strategies, Inc. offers a series of fact sheets on health literacy that can help the physician identify and assist those that might have difficulty understanding medical information. They also provide an extensive listing of related websites, publications, and other resources. Go to www.chcs.org

In addition to the Ask Me 3 patient tools, the Partnership for Clear Health Communication offers information on what providers and organizations can do to encourage good health communication. From the website, visitors can print or order a variety of brochures, posters, fact sheets, and guidelines; view a webcast of national experts addressing health literacy issues; and sign up for periodic updates. Go to www.askme3.org