

Health literacy awareness

bringing health information into sharper focus for patients and families

—by Susan Croteau RN; Christina Murphy, RN; and Tracy Waterhouse, RN, of the PCS Patient Education Committee

The US Department of Health and Human Services defines health literacy as the degree to which individuals have the capacity to obtain, process, and understand basic health information and services necessary to make the appropriate health decisions.

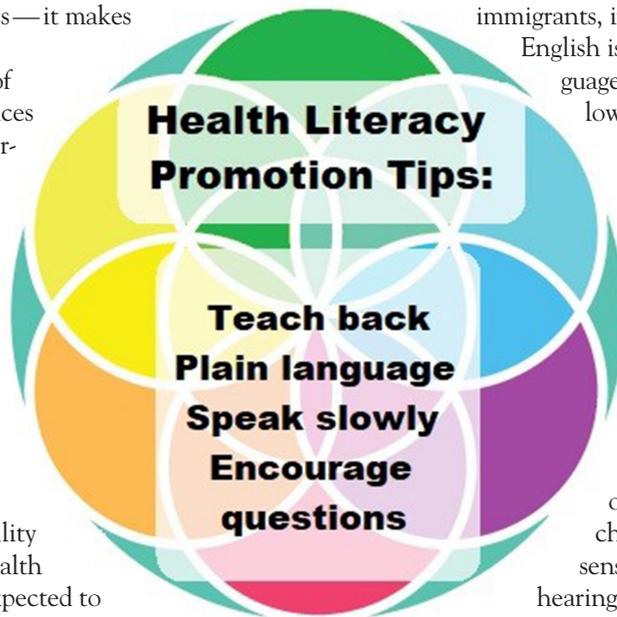
Autumn in New England is a kaleidoscope of beautiful, fall colors. Unfortunately, for many patients and families, accessing health information is like looking through a kaleidoscope of jumbled words and images—it makes no sense.

The US Department of Health and Human Services (2000) defines health literacy as the degree to which individuals have the capacity to obtain, process, and understand basic health information and services necessary to make the appropriate health decisions. Health literacy requires reading, listening, analytical and decision-making skills, and the ability to apply those skills to health situations. Patients are expected to understand instructions, read prescription drug labels, schedule and keep appointments, and read and understand patient-education mate-

rials. All these skills are necessary to navigate the complex healthcare system.

According to the National Assessment of Adult Literacy (US Department of Education, 2003), nine out of ten adults lack the skills necessary to manage their health care and prevent disease. The most vulnerable populations include older adults, immigrants, individuals for whom English is their second language, minorities, and low-income populations.

Some factors that contribute to low health literacy include low educational attainment and reading levels, learning disabilities, and cultural or language barriers. Adults, 65 and older, are vulnerable because of potential cognitive changes or a decline in sensory abilities (such as hearing or vision). And a patient's ability to comprehend health issues or understand health information can be compromised by stress and illness.



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Low health literacy is associated with riskier behaviors, more frequent emergency-room visits and hospital admissions, and poorer health outcomes, including mortality.

According to the report, *Low Health Literacy: Implications for National Policy* (2002), “Low health literacy is a major source of economic inefficiency in the US healthcare system.” The report estimates that the cost of low health literacy to the US economy is between \$106 and \$238 billion annually. That represents 7-17% of all personal healthcare expenditures.

Improving health communication and health literacy reduces healthcare costs and increases quality of care. That doesn’t mean that clinicians need to tailor educational communications to a specific patient’s literacy level. A good guideline is to remember that all patients appreciate clear, plain-language communication and an opportunity to ask questions.

What materials are available to help healthcare providers communicate with and educate patients?

The MGH Patient and Family Education Materials and Resources website, accessible through Partners Applications, provides patient-education materials and links to other resources. Many of these resources are produced by MGH experts to ensure standardized information and best practice. Also included are links to preferred websites like CAPE for Oncology, CARMA for Pediatrics, and links to medication sites and materials in multiple languages, such as CareNotes and Drugnotes.

Part of choosing the right patient-education resource is considering the language used to convey health information. The Blum Patient & Family Learning Center offers a plain-language consulta-

tion and material-development process for departments that produce educational materials to ensure the information provided is clear, easy to understand, and appropriate for all patient populations. The Medical Interpreters Office offers translation services so that materials can be presented in the patient’s primary language.

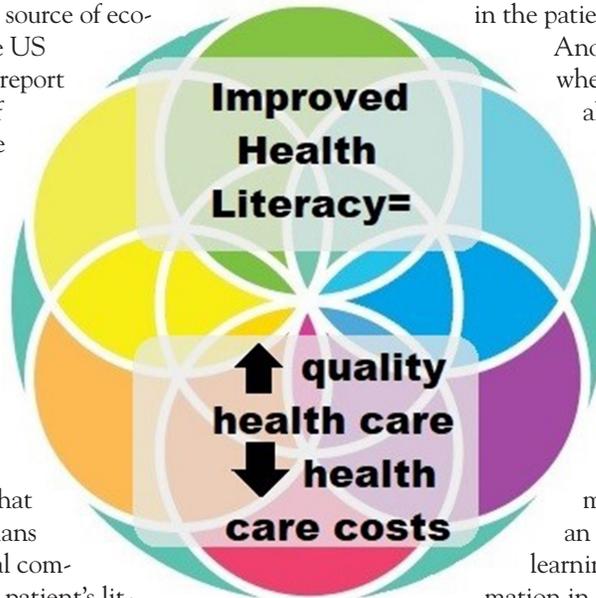
Another important tool when educating patients of all literacy levels is the teach-back method. Studies show that 40-80% of medical information presented to patients is forgotten, and almost half of what is retained is inaccurate. The teach-back method is one way to ensure patients understand health information, and it gives them an opportunity to reinforce learning by repeating the information in their own words.

If you’d like to brush up on your teach-back skills, check out the HealthStream course: *Improving Your Patient/Family Teaching Skills through the Teach Back/Show Back Method*.

As members of the healthcare team, it’s incumbent on us to assist patients and families in locating, understanding, and navigating healthcare information. Patients’ understanding of information guides their decisions and impacts their outcomes no matter where they are in the continuum of care.

For the purposes of this article, we compared the process of accessing health information to looking through a muddled kaleidoscope. Hopefully, the resources and strategies discussed here will help bring health information into sharper focus for patients and families.

For more information about health literacy or any of the resources included in this article, contact Tracy Waterhouse, RN, at 617-724-8189, or the Blum Patient & Family Learning Center at 617-724-7352.



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