Health Literacy: Help Your Patients Understand

Low Health Literacy: The Hidden Risk

Presented by:
American Medical Association Foundation & American Medical Association

10/03
Definition

Health Literacy is the ability to read, understand and act on health care information.
Up to _ of US population may be at risk for...

- Medical misunderstandings
- Mistakes
- Excess hospitalizations
- Poor health outcomes
Why are they at risk?

• Reliance on the written word for patient instruction

• Increasingly complex health system
  – More medications
  – More tests and procedures
  – Growing self-care requirements
## Changes in the Health Care System

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>30 Years Ago</th>
<th>Today</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Treatment of Acute Myocardial Infarction</td>
<td>6 weeks bed rest in hospital</td>
<td>2-4 days in hospital (M&amp;R Guidelines)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Available Prescription Drugs</td>
<td>650</td>
<td>10,000 +</td>
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<td>Treatment of new onset diabetes</td>
<td>3 weeks in hospital 2 hours a day of diabetic education classes</td>
<td>outpatient 0-3 hours diabetic education classes written materials internet telemedicine</td>
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## Changes in the Health Care System

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Available Sites of Care</th>
<th>30 Years Ago</th>
<th>Today</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Hospital</td>
<td>• Assisted Living</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Office</td>
<td>• Rehabilitation</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• Own Home</td>
<td>• Hospital</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• Homes for the Aged</td>
<td>- ICU</td>
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<td></td>
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<td>- Step down</td>
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<td>- Extended care</td>
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<td>• Nursing facility</td>
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<td>• Subacute</td>
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<td>• Skilled</td>
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<td>• Intermediate</td>
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<td>• Chronic Disease Hospital</td>
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<td>• Home Care</td>
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<td>• Home Health Care</td>
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<td>• Group Homes</td>
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<td>• Foster Care</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• Telemedicine</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
We all feel “health illiterate” on first hearing a new diagnosis

- 50% of us can read the instructions and brochures, ask questions, get on the internet to learn more

- 50% of us cannot
National Adult Literacy Survey

- $n = 26,000$
- Most accurate portrait of literacy in U.S.
- Scored on 5 levels
1993 National Adult Literacy Survey

- Level 3: 32%
- Level 4: 17%
- Level 1: 27% - Marginal Literacy
- Level 2: 21% - Inadequate Literacy
- Level 5: 3% -
What is it like?

• The following passage simulates what a reader with low general literacy (NALS Level 1) sees on the printed page.
• Read the entire passage out loud.
• You have 1 minute to read.
• Hint: The words are written backwards and the first word is “cleaning”
GNINAELC – Ot erussa hgh ecnamrofrep, yllacidoirep naelc eht epat sdaeh dna natspac revenehw uoy eciton na noitalumucca fo tsud dna nworb-red edixo selcitra. Esu a nottoc baws denetsiom htiw lyporposi lohocla. Eb erus on lohocla sehcuot eht rebbur strap, sa ti sdnet ot yrd dna yllautneve kcarc eht rebbur. Esu a pmad tholc ro egnops ot naelc eht tenibac. A dlim paos, ekil gnihsawhsid tnegreted, lliw pleh evomer esaerg ro lio.
What is it like?
Health Literacy

- Pill bottles
- Appointment slips
- Informed consents
- Discharge instructions
- Health education materials
- Insurance applications
Video: *The patient’s voice...*

- This video was made by the AMA in 2003
- You will see real patients and real physicians talking about literacy issues
What are the barriers to patients?

- Barriers to Access
- Barriers to Diagnosis
- Barriers to Treatment
Barriers Discussion:
The shame of low literacy

The patient’s voice….

• Mrs. Walker: “It paralyzes your every thought.”
• Mr. Bowman: “This is your greatest fear.”
• Mrs. Grigar: “I hide it….it drains you.”
• Mr. Bell: “I blame them, they don’t respect me.”
“Patients won’t tell you.”

% of patients who have never told:

- Supervisor 91%
- Children 53%
- Spouse 68%
- Anyone 19%

In a doctor’s office, patients may feel…..

- Fearful
- Anxious
- Angry
- Stupid
- Embarrassed
- Ashamed
- Suspicious, on guard
- Other emotions?
Where to start?

*Using assessment to address literacy issues*…

- Be alert for “red flags”
- Use the “social history” to assess literacy
- Use “medication reviews” to identify and address problems
Red Flags:
Patients may seek to protect themselves by . . .

- Seeking help only when illness is advanced
- Walking out of the waiting room
- Making excuses
- Pretending they can read
- Becoming angry, demanding
- Clowning around, using humor
- Being quiet, passive
- Detour, letting doctor miss the concern
Red Flags: Patients may say....

- “I forgot my glasses. I’ll read this when I get home.”
- “I forgot my glasses. Can you read this to me?”
- “Let me bring this home so I can discuss it with my children.”
Shame-free communication means..

- Be curious, *listen*
- *Ask before you advise*
- Give the patient time to respond
- Take the patient’s concern seriously
- Discuss how you can best help the patient care for themselves
- Ask patients how they want information communicated to them
- Be positive, hopeful, empowering
Medications:

The patient’s voice….

Mrs. Irwin: Thinks her lipitor is lithium.
Mrs. Tilsley: Mixes up her accolate with her tranquilizer.
Mr. Dallas: Confused about the meaning of “twice a day.”
Use a “medication review” to identify problems:

- Ask patients to bring in all their medications
- Ask them to name and explain the purpose of each one
- Discuss exactly how and when they take each one
- Use this discussion to identify areas of confusion and to answer questions
Practice: Plain, non-medical language

- Anti-inflammatory
- Benign
- Contraception
- Hypertension
- Oral
- Echocardiogram
Strep Throat
Sample Answer: Strep Throat

Treating Strep Throat:
• Take one pill in the morning and one pill in the evening.
• Take the medicine every day for 10 days – even if you feel better before then.
• Stopping the pills before 10 days can result in serious heart problems.
One Third of Patients at 2 Public Hospitals Had Inadequate Functional Health Literacy

Williams, Parker, Baker, et al. JAMA 1995
Many Patients Struggle with Health Reading Tasks

- Take medicine every 6 hours 22%
- Take medicine on empty stomach 42%
- Upper GI instructions (4th grade) 21%
- Medicaid Rights (10th grade) 46%
Inadequate Health Literacy Increases with Age
Patients with Low Literacy More Likely to be Hospitalized

Baker, Parker, Williams, et al. *JGIM* 1999
Costs of Poor Health Literacy

$50-$73 Billion*

- Longer hospital stays
- Ineffective use of prescriptions
- Misunderstanding treatment plans

*Estimated by the National Academy on an Aging Society using 1998 figures
Low Literate Diabetic Patients Less Likely to Know Correct Management

- Know symptoms of low blood sugar (hypoglycemia)
- Know correct action for hypoglycemic symptoms

Low Literate

Marginally Literate

Literate

Percent

Guiding Principles

• Provide easy-to-understand information for ALL patients.

• Ensure the environment is patient-friendly and shame-free for ALL patients.
Who to contact for more information:

• Website:
  – www.amafoundation.org

• E-mail:
  – joanne_schwartzberg@ama-assn.org

• Other resources
  – “Health Literacy: Help Your Patients Understand” kit, order through 1-800-621-8335
Module Evaluation:

• Please take a minute to complete the evaluation form.
• Your feedback is extremely helpful to us!