“Closing the gap in health literacy is an issue of fundamental fairness and equity and is essential to reduce health disparities.”

Healthy People 2010
What is health literacy... Why does it matter?

The ability to obtain, understand, and use the information needed to make informed health choices is known as health literacy (DHHS, 2000). Low literacy among members of populations such as older adults, those with poor reading skills, those with limited mastery of the English language, members of ethnic or cultural minorities, and immigrants is likely a major contributor to health disparities in this country, according to Healthy People 2010.

People with low health literacy often lack not only the ability to read well but also knowledge about the body, its functioning, and the nature and causes of different types of disease, as well as how to access and use the health care system. Low health literacy can affect anyone, regardless of age, race, education or income. Low health literacy costs the nation’s health system as much as $58 billion annually.

Health literacy is a complex and multi-dimensional issue. It encompasses much more than reading skills and includes cultural relevance and patient-provider communication issues. In the United States, the majority of people with low literacy skills are white, native-born Americans.

Despite this fact, minority groups are disproportionately affected by low health literacy, as are older adults, recent immigrants, those with chronic disease, and those with low socioeconomic status.

Findings from multiple studies suggest that we cannot expect people to disclose difficulties in understanding health information. Embarrassment, intimidation or simple
confusion prevents people from discussing their health literacy issues. Reducing the anxiety and embarrassment of patients is critical to both improving health literacy and health outcomes.

Literacy skills are the strongest predictor of individual health status. Because the issue of health literacy is widespread and impacts nearly every citizen in some fashion, it is perhaps the most significant challenge to improving the health of the population.

The time has come for North Carolina to recognize the seriousness of low health literacy and make this issue a priority. The North Carolina Council on Health Literacy is prepared to lead the state in this effort.

To successfully address health literacy, a collaborative effort is needed. The complexity of this issue requires cooperation from educators, literacy experts, health professionals, health systems, the academic community, the community at-large, and any and all interested persons and organizations. We look forward to working together for a healthier North Carolina.

Spotlight On… Guilford Health Literacy Forum

One North Carolina county has already begun working on health literacy issues. In 2005, the Health Literacy Forum was formed as a collaborative group of agencies and individuals concerned with the health literacy needs of the community.

Using best practice research and a thoughtful strategic planning process, the Forum conducted a community needs assessment and initiated multiple pilot projects to determine how to best meet community needs.

In just three years, the Health Literacy Forum has accomplished:

Assessments
- immigrant adult needs
- adult basic education student needs
- immigrant youth perspectives on health literacy
- health literacy in K-12 NC public schools
- literacy levels among adult patients at local clinics
- two separate assessments of health care provider perspectives on health literacy (qualitative and quantitative)

Model Programs
- health literacy for parents of young children
- health literacy curriculum for adult ESOL students
- targeted low health literacy materials for diabetic individuals
- materials readability programming for physician practices

health literacy and cultural competency training for health professionals
- health literacy study circles for adult education instructors

In just three years, the Health Literacy Forum has accomplished:

Assessments
- immigrant adult needs
- adult basic education student needs
- immigrant youth perspectives on health literacy
- health literacy in K-12 NC public schools
- literacy levels among adult patients at local clinics
- two separate assessments of health care provider perspectives on health literacy (qualitative and quantitative)

Model Programs
- health literacy for parents of young children
- health literacy curriculum for adult ESOL students
- targeted low health literacy materials for diabetic individuals
- materials readability programming for
Plans in Progress
• child and adolescent health literacy skill development delivered through a science museum
• simplified prescription medication labeling and instructions
• targeted systems changes for improved health literacy in a large medical center
• family health literacy delivered through a children’s museum

The Guilford Health Literacy Forum includes leadership from Reading Connections, Moses Cone Health System, Greensboro AHEC, The University of North Carolina at Greensboro, and Lutheran Family Services. An additional 25 community agencies collaborate on various projects of the Forum.

Using a coalition model, the Forum has successfully raised awareness and implemented best practice programs with limited funding. As a true partnership, each member of the Forum has contributed to activities and helped bring health literacy to the forefront of community health issues. This model can be replicated in other North Carolina communities.

For more information about the Guilford Health Literacy Forum, call 336-230-2223 or email jgore@readingconnections.org.

Ready to make a difference in your community?

To join the North Carolina Council on Health Literacy and find out how to activate your community, email nchealthliteracy@uncg.edu or call 336-217-9741.

The Council can provide workshops, training, toolkits and technical assistance to help get you started. Once you’re up and running, we’ll help keep you abreast of current research and best practices and keep you connected to your neighbors across the state.

Current statewide activities include:
• Study of health literacy in NC hospitals
• Regional networking meetings
• 21st Century Skills training for K-12 public school teachers
• Workshops on integrating health literacy into adult education
• Technical assistance for local coalition development
• Readability service for assessing and re-designing health education materials

We look forward to serving you!

Who Should Join?
• Hospitals
• Health Departments
• Community Colleges
• Public Schools
• Literacy Agencies
• Health professionals
• Community organizations
• Social service agencies
• Colleges & Universities
• Libraries
• Health & medical organizations
• Any individuals interested in improving health literacy!