Health Literacy

How a Few Simple Words Improve Patients’ Health

Richard Feifer

Recent studies have shown that nearly one quarter of Americans read at or below a fifth grade level, yet medical leaflets and other healthcare data are often written at or above the 10th grade level. Poor health literacy contributes to a host of healthcare problems, including increased health costs, medication errors, adverse drug events and noncompliance. There are steps that can be taken to bridge the health literacy gap between healthcare providers and patients, resulting in an improved physician/patient relationship, better patient health and reduction in healthcare costs.

Nearly one quarter of Americans read at or below the fifth grade level, yet medical leaflets and other healthcare data are often written at or above the 10th grade level. The American Medical Association (AMA) Foundation estimates 90 million Americans are classified as having low health literacy. Health literacy, which is defined as the ability to read, understand and act on healthcare information, affects patients regardless of medical condition, socioeconomic class, age group, or educational level.

Poor health literacy contributes to a host of healthcare problems, including increased health costs, medication errors, adverse drug events and noncompliance. According to the AMA Foundation, the cost to the healthcare system because of poor health literacy alone results in approximately $73 billion annually in unnecessary doctor visits and hospitalizations. The National Academy on an Aging Society states people with low health literacy skills are less likely to obtain preventive care and are more likely to have poor health outcomes. According to research published in the *Journal of American Board Family Practice*, a person’s Sickness Impact Profile (SIP) is highly correlated with their reading level, even after adjusting for factors such as age, sex, ethnicity, marital status, insurance, occupation, and income.

But there are steps that can be taken to bridge the health literacy gap between healthcare providers and patients, resulting in an improved physician/patient relationship, better patient health, and reduction in healthcare costs.

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The Negative Impact of Low Health Literacy

An Ad Hoc committee on Health Literacy for the Council on Scientific Affairs found that annual healthcare costs are four times higher for people with low health literacy compared to the general public. Patients with low health literacy are also four times more likely than other patients to be noncompliant with their medications, often skipping doses of important medications in a two-day period.

A population-based study published in *American Pharmacy* found that 97 percent of respondents consistently understood the prescription medication instruction of “take one tablet daily,” but other prescription instructions resulted in much less comprehension. In one instance, only 7 percent of respondents understood medication instructions. In other studies, the standard instruction, “Take this medicine on an empty stomach, one hour before or two hours after meals,” was misunderstood by 27 percent of managed-care Medicare patients over age 65, and 42 percent of urban public hospital patients.

Unfortunately, many of the people who need medical information the most, such as senior citizens and urban emergency department patients, are the least likely to understand and act on healthcare information. According to a 1995 study published in *The Journal of the American Medical Association*, in urban public hospital emergency departments, 35 percent of English-speaking patients, 67 percent of Spanish-speaking patients, and 81 percent of English-speaking senior citizens were not able to understand typical examples of the medical jargon clinicians use, such as “PRN” instead of “whenever necessary” and “stat” instead of “immediately.”

Opportunities and Solutions

Healthcare providers can do their part to increase medical/health literacy. The following tips can close the gap between healthcare providers and the patients they treat. These tips have been proven effective for Medco Health’s *Positive Approaches* health management programs. The programs focus on educating members about their disease state and help them learn how to better manage their health. The easy-to-understand communication provided within the programs has been extremely successful in improving patient adherence to therapy regimens, with program participants reporting satisfaction rates of 95 to 100 percent.

- **Need to Know.** The patient’s perspective is critical. Physicians, healthcare providers, and medical literature should avoid general background information and instead focus on a “need to know” basis by emphasizing the desired behavior, rather than just the medical facts. Materials should focus on what to do and why, not what to know.

- **Keep It Simple.** Healthcare providers should adopt a “keep it simple” approach for medical and prescription information in both verbal and written form. Offer small bits of information at a time and limit the message to main objectives. The “keep it simple” approach is effective for all literacy levels, and is preferred by patients, according to the National Work Group on Literacy and Health.

  Print materials should include different font sizes and headings to help ensure key messages are not misunderstood or ignored. When providing a list, use bullets. Pages should look uncluttered, with a balance of printed materials and white space. When developing printed materials for seniors, the font size should be large enough for them to easily read. Restating a message by providing a summary offers reinforcement and emphasizes the message.

  In addition to providing written materials, healthcare providers should reinforce messages verbally. Ask patients if they understand their therapy regimens, and have them repeat verbal instructions to guarantee patient comprehension. Some healthcare providers offer additional verbal resources to patients, such as a 24-hour toll-free number to assist them with any questions or concerns about their conditions or treatments.

- **Write at the Appropriate Reading Level.** People with low health literacy often have poor reading skills. They read words individually, rather than in context, and also tire during long passages or skip over unfamiliar words. For example, a retail pharmacy survey published in *American Pharmacy* revealed that nearly 20 percent of respondents did not know what “orally” meant. One
needs to approach the level of their reading materials with caution and be cognizant that people with low health literacy may miss the message's context and draw incorrect conclusions if they cannot understand what is written.

- **Promote Interactivity.** Create materials that require the reader's active involvement, such as checklists and questionnaires. For instance, participants of Medco Health's *Positive Approaches* Asthma Program receive an asthma brochure that contains a weekly symptom diary where they can record key data. Program participants are asked to record symptoms, their peak flow meter readings, medication usage, any asthma attacks, and asthma triggers. They are then encouraged to bring the completed tool with them to their next doctor visit.

- **Use Visual Aids.** Reinforce key messages by providing visual aids. Although photographs, color illustrations, and cartoons can improve comprehension, they should be used strategically. The use of graphics should enhance the message, not compete with it. For instance, a pamphlet given to the participants in Medco Health's *Positive Approaches* Asthma Program, which discusses the proper usage of an inhaler, has a supporting illustration of a person using the inhaler.

- **Avoid Scare Tactics.** Healthcare providers should focus on positive aspects of treatment. Excessive focus on the negative consequences of a condition can worsen patient compliance. In verbal and written communications, healthcare providers should use an emotionally supportive language and tone rather than a threatening one. Messages can be written in a positive tone while maintaining a serious message. For instance, literature in a diabetes guidebook discussing the serious possibility of developing diabetic nephropathy should be followed by steps diabetics can take to prevent it.

- **Test the Message for Effectiveness.** Use focus groups to assure content is on-target, comprehensible, relevant, affective, and culturally sensitive. For example, Medco Health conducted 30-minute interviews in 12 national markets with newly diagnosed chronic patients enrolled in the company's *Positive Approaches* programs for asthma, diabetes, cardiovascular, multiple sclerosis, and Hepatitis C. Of the newly diagnosed diabetes patients, 85 percent found the program materials provided valuable information on preventing diabetic complications and 90 percent of newly diagnosed asthma patients found the materials useful tools that helped them better manage their condition. This better comprehension could be a contributing factor for increased medication compliance, which, in turn, could lead to a reduction in healthcare costs.

**Conclusion**

With healthcare costs continuing to rise, it is no longer acceptable to ignore the problems of health literacy. It's time we all learn that the words we use are as valuable to a patient's health as the medicine they take.