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| **Skin Cancer** |

**What is Health Literacy?**

 Health literacy is defined in Healthy People 2010 as: “The degree to which people have the capacity to obtain, process, and understand basic health information and services needed to make appropriate health decisions.” Health literacy is required for a wide variety of tasks that are found in today’s complex health care systems. These tasks may include reading and understanding prescription bottle labels, appointment slips, consent forms, medical education brochures and doctor’s directions. Health literacy is not simply the ability to read. It requires a complex group of reading, listening, analytical, and decision-making skills, and the ability to apply these skills to health situations.

 A person’s level of health literacy is determined by a number of factors, not just their years of education or their general reading ability. Some of the factors that affect a person’s health literacy level include:

* Communication skills of lay persons and professionals
* Lay persons and professionals knowledge of health topics
* Culture
* Demands on health care and the public health care system
* Demands of the situation/context

Today’s health care system is moving more towards a consumer centered system forcing consumers to take a more active role in health care decisions.

**Health Literacy**

**Skills Needed for Health Literacy**

 There are certain skills that individuals need to have in order to perform certain tasks that could be asked of them in today’s health care system. These tasks require that the individuals be:

* Visually literate
* Computer literate
* Information literate
* Numerically and computationally literate

Most of these skills are required to carry out common tasks such as:

* Evaluating information for credibility and quality
* Analyzing risks and benefits
* Calculating dosages
* Analyzing test results
* Locating health information

It is also very important for individuals to have good oral communication skills so that they are better able to convey their health concerns and ask pertinent questions.

**Why is Health Literacy Important?**

According to the National Assessment of Health Literacy, only 12

percent of adults have proficient health literacy. This means that nearly nine of ten adults do not have the skills needed to manage their health and prevent disease. Health literacy involves several aspects of our daily life and has a direct impact of an individual’s quality of life.

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According to the American Medical Association, poor health literacy is "a stronger predictor of a person's health than age, income, employment status, education level, and race". Low literacy rates have been linked to poor health outcomes such as higher hospitalization rates and less use of preventive services. The National Center for Education Statistics conducted an adult health literacy survey in 1992 which concluded that individuals with low levels of health literacy were more likely to be poor and have health problems that limited their activities in comparison to individuals with higher levels of health literacy.

**Impact of Low Health Literacy**

 Low health literacy can have both direct and indirect consequences. The direct consequences can be easily identified and are very common throughout our complex health care system. Direct consequences can include non compliance with treatment or simple errors in medication, both due to a lack of understanding, not deliberate negligence. The indirect consequences are seen more before or after an individual has either entered or been discharged from the health care system. Indirect consequences include problems with insurance companies, access to health care services, or poor personal health choices.

 Low health literacy has an economic impact as well. The National Academy on an Aging Society estimated that additional health care costs incurred because of low health literacy was $73 billion in 1998.

**Who is at Risk?**

 There are certain populations that are more at risk for low health literacy rates than others. These populations include:

* Elderly age 65 and up – Two thirds of this population have inadequate or marginal literacy skills.
* Minority populations
* Immigrant populations
* Low income
* People with chronic mental or physical conditions

The reasons for these limited literacy skills include but are not limited to:

* Lack of educational opportunities
* Learning disabilities
* Cognitive declines in the elderly population
* The fact that the majority of individuals read 3-5 grade levels below their highest completed grade

**What can be done?**

 The primary responsibility for improving health literacy lies on the shoulders of health care professionals and the public health care system. A major step being taken to help improve health literacy in general is the production of health information using plain language. The use of plain language makes written and oral information easier to understand. A document written in plain language enables the reader to find what they are looking for and understand the information once they have found it. Some key elements to writing or speaking in plain language are:

* Organizing information so that important points come first.
* Breaking complex information into understandable pieces.
* Using simple words and defining any technical terms.
* Using the active voice.
* Knowing your audience.

The National Patient Safety Foundation is sponsoring a program called “Ask Me 3”. The program was designed with the thought that communication breakdowns are the leading source of medical errors. Ask Me 3 promotes three simple but essential questions that patients should ask their providers in every health care interaction: 1)What is my main problem?; 2) What do I need to do?; 3) Why is it important for me to do this?

 Low health literacy is a problem of growing concern in today’s health care system, especially with the baby boomers making the transition in to their senior years. Small steps are being made to combat this problem but further research needs to be conducted in the following fields identified by the American Medical Association:

* Literacy screening
* Methods of health education
* Medical outcomes and economic costs
* Understanding the causal pathway of how literacy influences health.

**Other News:**

**Upcoming Events:**

* Hispanic Festival, St. Bernards Auditorium, May 1,2010 10a.m.-3p.m.
* Dr. Alan Wolfelt will present The Wilderness of Grief: Finding Your Way on May 18th
* Exploring the Spiritual Aspects of Death, Grief, and Mourning: A Workshop for Caregivers on May 19th. For more information and a registration form go to <http://www2.astate.edu/conhp/>
* HMG Health and Fitness Expo April 10th and 11th at the Convocation Center. For more information, please call 870.931.DOCS or email info@hmg.md

\*\*If you have any suggestions for newsletter topics, please contact Dean Susan Hanrahan at hanrahan@astate.edu.

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