

Communicating with patients: improving health literacy and outcomes

It has been shown that patients immediately forget 40-80% of medical information provided to them by health care providersⁱ. In particular, patients with low health literacy have more difficulty recalling health informationⁱⁱ.

An individual's health literacy refers to their ability to access, understand and apply information to make effective decisions about their health and healthcare. Health literacy is influenced by individual factors such as education level or cultural background, as well as the health care environment – from policies and processes, to communication with health care providers.

Low health literacy is a common problem in Australiaⁱⁱⁱ; the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare reports that 59% of Australians aged 15-74 do not have the adequate health literacy skills needed to effectively access health services and manage their health^{iv}.

The impact of low health literacy

Low health literacy is associated with:

- higher hospitalisation rates^{v,vi,vii,viii}
- more frequent emergency department visits^v
- increases in overall health service use^{vi,vii,viii}
- higher mortality rates and worse health outcomes amongst elderly people^{v,vii,ix} (including poorer diabetes control^{vii})
- lower participation rates in preventative health including: influenza immunisation, mammography^{vii}, cervical and colon cancer screening^x, and
- increases in government health expenditure^{vi,xi}.

Patients with low health literacy:

- have a higher risk of adverse health events^{xii}
- have less knowledge about their own health^{vii}
- have lower adherence to medication^{vii, ix} and lifestyle advice^x
- have less knowledge about the importance of preventative health^{vii}
- are less able to participate in chronic disease self management^{vii}
- have higher rates of depression^x, and
- spend more on health care and medicines^{vi,viii}.

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Improve communication, improve outcomes

Effective communication between health care providers and patients can improve health outcomes in both patients with low and high health literacy^{vii,xiii}.

Communication breakdowns in the chain of care are a leading factor in preventable disability and death^{xiv}, and are a frequent cause of complaints against health providers. Nearly 13% of all complaints against Victorian health care providers received by the Health Service Commission in 2014-2015^{xv} were solely communication-related.

Research has shown differences in communication styles between primary care providers who have and have not received formal complaints or insurance claims made against them^{xvi,xvii}. Health care providers without formal complaints or claims were more likely to:

- listen actively
- ask their patients their opinions
- check their patients' understanding
- encourage their patients to talk.

Strategies to improve communication with your patients

Certain evidence-based communication strategies can be used to improve health outcomes in patients with all levels of health literacy^{vii,xiii}. Effective communication can save time, with better adherence and follow-upⁱⁱⁱ.

The Teach-back method can be used during consultations to improve patient recall and understanding. Using Teach-back has been shown to improve patients' health outcomes including HbA1c control^{vii} and inhaler technique^{xiii}. Other simple evidence-based approaches to improving recall and understanding include:

- encouraging patients to repeat instructions out loud to a listener^{xviii}
- expressing directions specificity, "you must take one week off work" as opposed to "you need to rest"ⁱ
- using plain language rather than medical jargon
- sitting face-to-face with patients
- using simple diagrams and pictures, and
- repeating directions multiple times^{ix}.

Research shows that consultations that include checking patients' recall and understanding (including using Teach-back) do not take any longer^{iii,vii,xix}, and prevent future unnecessary health service useⁱⁱⁱ.

For more information on effective communication strategies and health literacy, including practical tools and other resources, visit www.mpcn.org.au/HL

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