

MEDIA INSIGHT SERIES

CONTENT OF CARE

Health literacy in America and the implications for providers.



In its *Healthy People 2010* report, the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Office of Disease Prevention and Health Promotion defines health literacy as, “the degree to which individuals have the capacity to obtain, process and understand basic health information and services needed to make appropriate health decisions.”¹ Simply put, health literacy is the ability to read, understand and act on healthcare information, but from diagnoses and prescriptions to appointment slips and self-care instructions, it’s anything but straightforward for millions of Americans.

“Nearly half of all adult Americans do not understand their healthcare information,” says Aileen Kantor, a social entrepreneur who founded Bethesda, Md.-based Health Literacy Innovations (HLI) to tackle the problem of health illiteracy in the U.S., “and from rising costs, up to \$236 billion annually, to poor health outcomes, it’s a dangerous and growing public health issue.”

While senior citizens, immigrants and the poor are likelier to have trouble processing health-related information, health illiteracy can affect anyone, regardless of age, education or income level. According to the Boston, Mass.-based National Patient Safety Foundation (NPSF), “The majority of those with low literacy skills in the United States are white, native-born Americans.”²

Jargon-packed “medicalese” is part of the problem; another is the fear of speaking up. Pharmaceutical giant Pfizer, a health literacy leader, describes a “silent epidemic” of people too ashamed to admit their inability to read or comprehend health information.³

It’s a problem that demands plain language solutions, and as some managed care organizations, insurers and other industry players are discovering, simplifying the language and literacy of care is just what the doctor ordered.

UNHEALTHY DIAGNOSES

Just as financial illiteracy produces money ills, health illiteracy is a well-documented path to painful outcomes. Dating to the early 1990s, a considerable body of research reveals the troubling association between poor literacy skills and poor, often fatal, health consequences.

The Partnership for Clear Health Communication, an initiative of the NPSF, finds that only 50 percent of all patients take medications as directed, leading to compliance issues and possible negative health outcomes. Additionally, the NPSF finds that adults with low health literacy average 6 percent more hospital visits, remain in the hospital nearly two days longer and have annual healthcare costs four times higher than those with proficient health literacy skills.⁴

Health Literacy by Race and Ethnicity, U.S. Population

	PROFICIENT	INTERMEDIATE	BASIC	BELOW BASIC	POP. WITH BASIC OR BELOW
WHITE	14%	58%	19%	9%	59,208,975
BLACK	2%	41%	34%	24%	20,101,750
HISPANIC	4%	31%	25%	41%	23,301,839
ASIAN	18%	52%	18%	13%	3,298,968
AMERICAN INDIAN	7%	45%	23%	25%	1,188,458
MULTIRACIAL	3%	59%	28%	9%	2,525,704

Source: National Assessment of Adult Literacy, 2003

Dr. George Isham is medical director and chief health officer of Bloomington, Minn.-based HealthPartners, the nation's largest nonprofit healthcare organization. He also sits on the board of America's Health Insurance Plans (AHIP) and

Healthcare costs for those with low health literacy are four times higher than for those with proficient skills.

chairs the Institute of Medicine's Roundtable on Health Literacy. Last year, he stated the health illiteracy case thus: "We know that 90 million Americans have inadequate health literacy and that low health literacy leads to

delayed diagnosis, poorer physical and mental health, and increased risk of death."⁵

The consequences can be deadly. In 2007, Northwestern and Emory Universities conducted a study of 3,260 Medicare managed-care enrollees, one-quarter of whom were deemed medically illiterate. Almost 40 percent of that group died during the study, compared with 19 percent of those who were literate. Factoring in other health-related variables, the study concluded that medically illiterate patients were 50 percent more likely to die.⁶

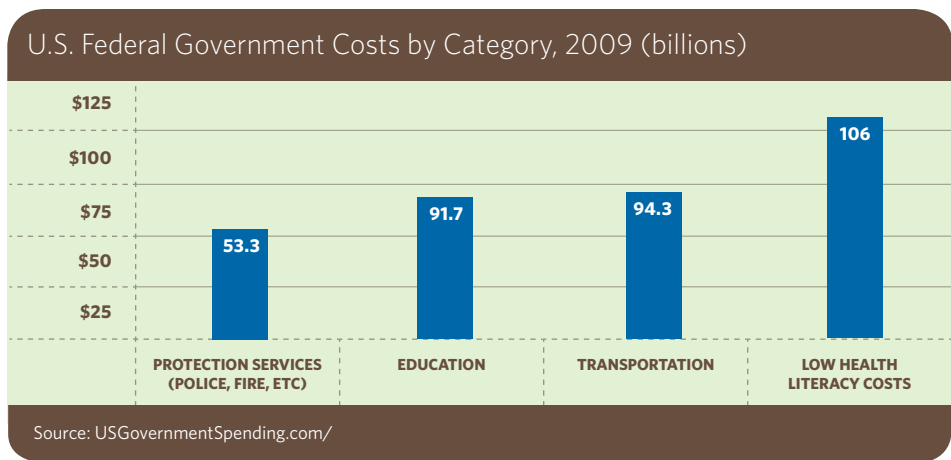
The negative outcomes are financial, too. The University of Connecticut's 2007 *Low Health Literacy: Implications for National Health Policy* study proposes that low health literacy costs the American economy between \$106

billion to \$236 billion annually. "Our findings suggest that low health literacy exacts enormous costs on both the health system and society, and that current expenditures could be far better directed through a commitment to improving health literacy," stated John A. Vernon, PhD, the report's lead author.⁷

The University of Connecticut report's call for "addressing the low health literacy problem as part of national health reform" was not the first for moving literacy up the health agenda. In its landmark April 2004 report, *Health Literacy: A Prescription to End Confusion*, the Institute of Medicine identified national attention to health literacy as "critical to successful healthcare."⁸

Yet, even as President Obama's historic health reform bill dominates the headlines, health literacy policymaking remains elusive. Introduced in December 2007 as "a bill to ensure that all Americans have basic health literacy skills to function effectively as patients and healthcare consumers," the bipartisan National Health Literacy Act, despite the endorsement of leading organizations such as AARP, the American Medical Association and the American College of Physicians, did not survive committee review.⁹

"Awareness is growing, but we are not where we should be," says Kantor, adding that, "the onus is on the healthcare industry to take leadership." Among other barriers, she explains, are entrenched



societal trends such as low literacy in the U.S., a lack of infrastructure to defuse cultural barriers, the pervasive use of medical jargon in health communications and the hard-to-measure ROI of health literacy. However, there is progress to report, as some organizations are rewriting their approach to health communications.

CRYSTAL-CLEAR COMMUNICATIONS

A stark fact of U.S. health literacy: most Americans read at a fifth-grade level, while most healthcare information is written at a 10th-grade level.¹⁰ “This is yet another compelling reason for providers to pay attention to the materials they create,” says Kantor, originally a long-term healthcare administrator who transitioned into healthcare PR and communications before founding HLI in 2006. Versed in the medical vernacular from her media relations work with the National Institutes of Health, AHIP and healthcare IT companies—who showed Kantor how technology simplifies business—she formally became involved with health literacy when Pfizer approached her to help promote the problem as a public health issue.

While Pfizer remains a leading proponent to this day through its Clear Health Communication Initiative, Kantor was not convinced of the existing industry approaches. “I did not see much efficiency in the health literacy industry and certainly no tools to streamline the process,” she recalls. Her answer was to partner with health literacy and health IT experts to found HLI with a focus on advocacy and creating tools to enhance health literacy. In addition to offering training, presentations and resource guides, HLI’s Health Literacy Advisor software product is helping players across the industry to streamline their communications.

Functioning like a spell-checker, the program, accessing a glossary of 10,000 interchangeable terms, scans medical literature for readability and literacy; upon finding less-than-literate words or terms, it highlights and simplifies those words with alternatives. With a fast-growing client base

dominated by HMOs, managed care providers, hospitals and insurers, the market’s embrace of the product is one sign of growing industry awareness, but as Aracely Rosales, HLI’s chief content expert and multilingual director, says, simplifying healthcare language is just the first step.

“More than just words and knowing how to read, health literacy involves a number of additional skills, including listening, analyzing and decision making,” says Rosales, a nationally recognized leader in cross-cultural

health communications who also serves as president of Philadelphia, Pa.-based Plain Language and Culture, Inc., a consortium of literacy, language and communication specialists dedicated to clear, plain language communications. “It’s about delivering information to patients, or end-users, at a level they want, is important to them, and that they can fully understand, so they can take care of themselves.”

When Rosales, a former teacher, fled her native Guatemala for the U.S. in 1981, she spoke no English; she remembers well the difficulties of trying to explain her child’s medical condition to a clinician. “Negotiating the healthcare system and health information is complex at every stage, especially for immigrants,” she says. “Responsibility is increasingly put in the hands of the consumer, yet people fearing the system avoid the system, waiting until they are so sick that they require emergency care. It’s a vicious cycle.”

By emphasizing plain language in patient brochures, plan materials, prescriptions and all other consumer touchpoints, the cycle can be broken. California-based Kaiser Permanente, for example, is a recognized managed care provider taking steps toward greater linguistic and cultural competence in

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healthcare.¹¹ Through patient and provider education materials developed by leading health literacy experts, the NPSF's "Ask Me 3" program promotes three essential questions that patients should ask their providers in every healthcare interaction.¹²

If the movement has an industry champion, it is Bronx, N.Y.-based Affinity Health Plan, a 245,000-member plan serving Medicare and Medicaid beneficiaries in the New York City metropolitan area. Dedicated to "operationalizing" health literacy, the company is engaging its workforce and providers in a sophisticated, multi-phased health literacy initiative, with the goal of ensuring that every staff/member interaction—verbal, written, or Web-based—conforms to the clear health communication principles. "Our core mission is to help our members to be as healthy as

they can be," says Abbe Abboa-Offei, Affinity's vice president of Customer and Community Connections. "Health literacy supports that mission by helping our members understand their particular health situation and make the right decisions concerning their healthcare."

Kantor sees Affinity, an HLI client, as a model for health literacy at the organizational level. "Instituting a successful program depends greatly on having executive-level buy-in, plus key internal sponsors and champions," she says. "With leadership from CEO Maura Bluestone, Affinity is translating health literacy into a serious, long-term corporate commitment."

The bottom line? "People who understand healthcare information are healthier," says Kantor.

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