

# Journal of Family Medicine Forecast

## Health Literacy Needed, Now More Than Ever!

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### Opinion

Health literacy is defined 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” and “the ability to access, comprehend, evaluate and communicate information as a way to promote, maintain and improve health in a variety of settings across the life-course” [1]. Thirteen percent of the European population shows inadequate health literacy skills, while 35,4% reveals problematic health literacy [2].

Poor health literacy has been consistently found to be a predictor of medication non-adherence, inappropriate access to care, increased health care costs, higher mortality rates, and inequity [3]. Inadequate health literacy may predict a misuse of health resources; besides, it may compromise the ability of health care systems to meet equity targets in providing health services. General health literacy is negatively associated with increased use of hospital services, emergency services and with a greater number of primary care visits [4].

Adequate health literacy is significantly related with healthy lifestyles, helps individuals understand what to do to promote and maintain their health and when to seek medical care, increases patient safety, improves outcomes, decreases monetary and time costs and is likely to broaden the reach of implemented health measures. People living with sufficient health literacy skills are less likely to smoke or to consume alcohol, as compared with their poor health literate counterparts.

Despite these evidences, and the fact that inadequate health literacy is viewed as a “silent epidemic” [5], it has been rarely contemplated as a strategic priority to improve the functioning of the health services and is frequently overlooked by both policy makers and health care practitioners.

That being stated, what kind of policies and interventions need be undertaken to curb the effects of inadequate health literacy?

Initiatives should concern the enhancement of the interactions between the providers of care and patients, improving the participation of patients in the provision of care and encouraging the healthcare professionals to adopt a patient-centered approach to health services provision. Enrichment of communication between healthcare professionals and patients is perhaps the most important and effective strategy [6]. The acknowledgment of the patients’ perspective in planning and designing health information materials is a key intervention to foster the establishment of a co-creating partnership between the provider and the healthcare service users. Health professionals need to adapt and continuously enhance their communication skills onto using familiar language at any point of contact with patients, avoid jargon, and explain health and technical terms [7]. Adopting a continuous pedagogical attitude towards patients, enabling exchange and shared decision-making, although time consuming at an initial stage, may bring enormous future benefit in terms of health service correct use, enrolment in treatment plans, empowerment to self-management, satisfaction and overall health outcomes. “Teach back” techniques may be useful in this context, making sure that healthcare providers, have explained information clearly to both patients and their family members or other caregivers. Asking to rephrase/back report understood recommendations and treatment plans improves patient-provider communication, patient health outcomes, helps reduce potential medication errors and mistakes with care instructions, assists patients to understand treatment

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regimens and disease warning signs, predictive of subsequent adherence to management plans and reduces readmissions [8].

One other fundamental initial step is the inclusion of Health Literacy in medical and other health care professionals education curricula, with the purpose of raising awareness and shaping medical skills onto a health literacy-promoting attitude, aligned with current and future population needs and complementing the still purely biomedical approach to care.

Other possible strategies are to create collaborative structures both within the health care services (e.g. public health/primary, secondary, tertiary care) but also between ministries of Health, Education and Science to develop and implement measures to address low Health Literacy, that act in close proximity to the population, possible using and informing on community resources. Assuming the desired first point of contact with Health Services, and given the longitudinal nature of care, Primary Health Care-based approaches to Health literacy makes sense and needs to be integrated as soon as possible into training and practice [9].

Until now, legislation has been poorly used to fight the impacts of poor health literacy on both the access to health services and healthcare costs. In a quite similar way, policy initiatives aimed at empowering the patients and involving them in the provision of care have widely disregarded an investment health literacy with that purpose. The demonstration of the effects of low health literacy on health and well-being but also on Economics, for example, and how these outcomes can be improved in a cost-effective manner is a major issue. The collaboration between multiple stakeholders interested in the appropriate functioning of the healthcare system has been found to be essential to address the effects of health literacy on healthcare costs.

All these initiatives are anticipated to produce significant cost savings, equipping the population with adequate information on self-care and prevention of disease, increasing awareness on shared responsibility for ones' own health. The potential profit from an investment on Health Literacy is needed, now more than ever. The example of the COVID-19 pandemic that showed on many occasions

the consequences health service misuse and of higher susceptibility to complicated disease. On the other hand, cooperation and coordination of different societal official and nonofficial efforts, under strong leadership, for countries more successful in hindering pandemic spread, has also paved the way for the effective implementation of community-oriented Health Literacy collaborative initiatives.

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