Health Literacy and Prevention

Comments by Charles Homer, MD, MPH, CEO
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National Initiative for Children's Healthcare Quality
Health Literacy and Prevention

Health Literacy

“The capacity to obtain, interpret and understand basic health information and services and the competence to use such information and services to enhance health.” (Ratzan and Parker 2000; IOM 2004).

Prevention

Prevent: to keep from happening or arising; make impossible

Prevention: any activity that reduces the burden of mortality or morbidity from disease
Diversity of Preventive Approaches

- Levels: **Primary, Secondary, Tertiary**
- Settings: Clinical, Community
- Agency:
  - Active (exercise) with conducive or hostile environments
  - Passive (fluoride, air bags)
Potential Leverage of Health Literacy on Prevention: Clinical

- How would enhanced health literacy improve prevention oriented behaviors in clinical prevention (counseling, screening, interventions (e.g., immunization))
  - Primary:
    - understanding risk and benefit
    - understanding specific actions and approaches to be taken
    - Potentially (if in scope) enhancing motivation
  - Secondary:
    - Same
    - Likely greater degree of motivation (balance of cultural values and health oriented priorities), greater harm with failure to engage
    - Likely greater degree of technical complexity of health information
## Proposed Strategies

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Strategy</th>
<th>Comment</th>
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<tr>
<td>More understandable health information</td>
<td>Yes…and likely limited impact unless elegant simplicity (e.g., interactive tools, tested messages)</td>
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| Enhancing ease of use of health delivery system | Complexity not likely major contributor to impaired clinical preventive services  
Navigator may assist in community preventive services |
| Training providers in communication          | Absolutely essential element of any strategy re: prevention—enhanced skills of providers in counseling re: behavior change.  
Mechanisms:  
certification and recertification  
Redefine professional roles/teams  
Undergraduate professional education |
Additional Strategies

- Training consumers/students (as youth)
- Prevention specialists
  - Community based: shared resource
- Longitudinal relationships
- Payment reform
Potential Leverage of Health Literacy on Prevention: Community

• How would enhanced health literacy improve prevention oriented behaviors?

• Community Prevention
  – Formulating public policy
    – Understanding and prioritizing risks and benefits
    – Balancing health and other priorities (liberty, academic performance, short vs. long term public expenditures)
  – Responding to public health/health promoting messages
## Proposed Strategies

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<tr>
<td>Equip families with self care strategies</td>
<td>Mechanism unclear: Routine education Special courses/promotoras</td>
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<td>Workplace wellness</td>
<td>Broad area with greater specificity needed, including specific role for health literacy (vs. financial incentives, physical environment).</td>
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<tr>
<td>Media</td>
<td>Much greater level of specificity needed: Training Rating Health fact check</td>
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<td>Improve health information in media</td>
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<tr>
<td>Additional Strategies</td>
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<td>School Wellness</td>
<td>Strengthen school (and day care) health policies. Include communication component.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Health Impact Assessments</td>
<td>Related to construction and development. Include communication component</td>
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Overarching Recommendation: Health Scorecard

- Substantial skepticism
  - Individual level scorecard fails to address:
    - Community Interventions
    - Facilitative vs. Toxic Environment

- Health literacy of scorecard itself

- Motivation potential of scorecard
  - Not linked to personal goals and priorities

- Potential adverse use of scorecard
Stakeholders

- Individual/Family
- Educational Institutions
- Media/Government/Sources of Public Information
- Health Care System
  - Plans, Organizations
  - Microsystems/Providers
Overall Recommendations

clarify scope and focus of health literacy interventions
- Capacity in general
- Competency with specific preventive actions
- Motivation/prioritization

create specific focus on:
- Clinical prevention OR
- Community (policy) AND
- Interface/mutual reinforcement
Overall Recommendations

- Address developmental issues
  - Parent/early childhood
    - Different ethical assumptions re: prevention
    - Dyadic relationships—preventive mental health
    - Greater community role
    - Educational standards
  - Middle adulthood
  - Elderly