Reframing Health Literacy as a Public Health Issue

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Who is Affected?

• All individuals may be affected by mismatch between literacy skills and materials

• However, some are disproportionately affected
  – Elderly
  – Racial and ethnic minorities
  – Immigrants
  – Limited education

• Potentially critical pathway through which education, income and other resources affect health care quality, disparities, and outcomes
Identifying People with Low Health Literacy Is Challenging

- A ‘hidden’ epidemic
- Screening is expensive and time consuming
- Lack of consensus on how to screen
- Interventions are difficult to target at the individual level
Most Health Decisions are Not Made in Isolation

• This is true of health management as well
• Individuals are affected by their own health literacy **AND** the health literacy of those around them
  – Family
  – Friends
  – Neighbors
  – Co-workers

RAND
Constrained Choice Perspective

• An individual living in an area with relatively high health literacy may benefit from the knowledge and abilities of his friends and neighbors.

• An individual living in an area where low health literacy is prevalent may actually receive counterproductive information from friends and neighbors.
Focusing on Communities, Rather than Individuals, Provides Opportunities for Action

- Helps communities ‘own’ the problem
- Can become a shared responsibility
- Can lead to efficient resource use and a positive return on investment
- Mapping can identify communities with low health literacy
RAND Built Capacity To Map Health Literacy in Small Geographic Areas

• Develop ‘predictive model’
  – Incorporates common census variables (e.g., age, gender, race/ethnicity, education, income, marital status, others)

• Apply output of the model to census data

• Map ‘hot spots’
Percent of Population with ‘Above Basic’ Health Literacy
(Intermediate or Proficient)
Prioritizing ‘Hot Spots’
Diagnosing a ‘Hot Spot’

What factors might explain the pattern of performance in Hispanic diabetic members living in this area?

Figure 2A. Rates of LDL Testing among Hispanic Diabetic Members by Census Tract. (Darker shading indicates worse performance, green shading indicates no plan

Figure 2B. Poverty Areas

Figure 2C. Linguistically Isolated
Missing Information Can Lead You in the Wrong Direction
What Will Mapping Enable You to Do?

• Identify areas and topics that are priority for intervention
• Bring partners to the table
  • Collaboration
  • Increase return on investment
• Select appropriate interventions and approaches that are targeted effectively
Questions?

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