Health Literacy, Public Health, and Chronic Disease Prevention

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Implications of Health Literacy for Public Health: A Workshop

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For over 15 years …

The multi-disciplinary field of health literacy has made the case for the negative health effects of low health literacy.
Increasing Evidence Links Lower Health Literacy to Poorer Individual Health

• Multiple studies reporting:
  • Poorer overall health
  • Less likely to make use of screening and preventive services
  • Present for health care in later stages of chronic disease
  • More likely to be hospitalized
  • Poorer understanding of treatment and their own health
  • Lower adherence to medical regimens
  • Increased health care costs
  • Die earlier
Is the Reverse True?

• Is proficient health literacy a protective factor against chronic disease?
Why Does it Matter?

- Increasingly complex health care system
- Financial and social costs of treating preventable chronic diseases
- Effective chronic disease prevention and self-management require health literacy skills to successfully:
  - Follow self-care plans
  - Make informed decisions and healthy behavior changes
  - Follow increasingly complex medication regimens
  - Communicate with health professionals
  - Escalate issues requiring further medical attention
Why Does it Matter? - 2

- Millions of individuals newly eligible for publicly funded or subsidized health insurance must navigate the system to find, understand, evaluate, communicate, and use information.
  - Understand eligibility guidelines
  - Complete forms and provide enrollment documentation
  - Understand and apply concepts such as premiums, copayments, and benefits
  - Understand which services are and are not covered
Why Does it Matter? - 3

• “The United States spends much more money on health care than any other country. Yet Americans die sooner and experience more illness than residents in many other countries. While the length of life has improved in the United States, other countries have gained life years even faster, and our relative standing in the world has fallen over the past half century.”

(National Research Council & Institute of Medicine, 2013)
Is Low Health Literacy the Root Cause of Chronic Disease?

  - “Several factors, including higher education levels, not being in the South or West, and low smoking rates, were associated with lower mortality rates.”
  - “Medical care variables, such as proportions of primary care providers, were not associated with lower rates.”
  - Improving health outcomes “will require increased public and private investment in the social and environmental determinants of health — beyond an exclusive focus on access to care or individual health behavior.”

(Kindig & Cheng, Health Affairs, 2013)
Does it Then Follow That…

Health literacy can help public health systems to empower people to prevent chronic disease, regardless of socioeconomic status or other social determinants of health.
Public Health and Health Literacy

• What is usually missing in public health approaches to chronic disease prevention?
  ○ Involved and engaged users/audiences
  ○ Linguistically and culturally appropriate messages
  ○ Trust
  ○ Mutual respect
The Public Health Context
The Public Health Challenge
Public Health Targets

- Knowledge
- Beliefs
- Behaviors
- Attitudes
Public Health Targets

Knowledge

Beliefs

Attitudes

Behaviors
Literacies are Behaviors
Literacies are Behaviors

- To improve literacy is to change behavior
  - Ex: To transition from learning to read ... to reading to learn is a change in behavior
Where’s health literacy?
Health literacy is not just literacy in a health context

Why not?
- Highly literate doctors and nurses smoke
- Low literate individuals can live a long, healthy life
Chronic Disease Prevention

Health Literacy

Integrative Approach to Public Health

Prevention of Chronic Disease

Start with people early and often

Include their whole lives

To achieve prevention
That is how …

- Health literacy can guide public health agencies and the people they serve in choices about where, when, why, and how to invest in chronic disease prevention.
Conclusion & Recommendations

• Health literacy is often neglected in public health efforts to prevent chronic disease

• What is needed:
  ○ Engage people early and often
  ○ Do NOT ‘dumb down’ complex truths
  ○ Explain them carefully, check in often for understanding and action
  ○ Prioritize prevention and wellness – Not sick care
  ○ Equally involve health professionals and the public
  ○ Address the social determinants of health
  ○ Basis for multi-sectoral, effective partnerships

>>> This approach saves money AND improves health <<<
Thank you!!!!