What is health literacy and how has it evolved over time?

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The degree to which individuals have the capacity to obtain, process, and understand basic health information and services needed to make appropriate health decisions.

- Healthy People 2010, 2020; Institute of Medicine, 2004; Ratzan & Parker, 2000

Communication for the public good.
- Ratzan, 2001

The degree to which individuals can obtain, process, understand, and communicate about health-related information needed to make informed health decisions.

- Berkman, Davis, & McCormack, 2014
NIH-funded health literacy research

- **Understanding and promoting health literacy**
  - OBSSR-led PARs 2004-2016
  - PARs = Special review and/or receipt considerations

- **Investigator-initiated and other standard FOAs**
  - 536 projects, $504 million through FY2015

- **9,600+ health-literacy publications in PubMed**

**Legend**

FOA = Funding Opportunity Announcement
PA = Program Announcement, one type of NIH FOA
Literature of health literacy

Operationalizes and places topic in **clinical, personal, and health-specific settings** to demonstrate that while health literacy may comprise an individual’s capacity, such capacity is constantly in flux given a person’s

- Milieu,
- Group(s) to which one belongs,
- Type of setting, and,
- Wellness and/or disease issues

... that a person faces at any given time.
Individual health-literacy capacity varies

**Themes from NIH portfolio**
- Disease issue
- Setting/context/situation
- Target-population group
- Wellness issue

**Target populations**
- American Indian adults
- Teen mothers
- Multiple age groups
- Physicians, nurses, practitioners, pharmacists
- Health-practitioner students

**Disease contexts**
- Cancer-risk groups
- Diabetics with foot ulcers
- (Non-)adherent cancer, glaucoma, and HIV patients
Increased emphasis on communication

- Family discussions
- Language proficiency levels
- Self-reported literacy and numeracy abilities
- Patient-physician communication
- Prescription-dosing education,
- Shared-decision-making processes
- Negotiation processes to obtain
  - Informed treatment consent
  - Research participant consent
    - with patients/participants
    - across educational levels
Research models, development, tests

Models include
  o Cultural- and linguistic-tailoring of interventions
  o Social-network analyses
  o Wait-listed, randomized controlled trials

Development and tests of
  o New and existing tools to measure human health literacy
  o Whether and how health information is sufficiently clear so typical patients are likely to understand it
  o Reliability and validity of tests across
    ✓ patient populations
    ✓ healthcare provider types
    ✓ health care organizations
Hypothesis-generating

**Studies on complex health problems**

- Qualitative study with GPs, patients, pharmacists
  - How to improve prescription adherence among people who take multiple scripts for multiple conditions?

- What types of conversations with elders are most effective to determine what life-sustaining treatment they envision before they become unable?
  - To decide
  - To converse
Common element: Communication

The symbolic means people use to describe themselves, their feelings, situations, issues—to account for their behaviors and to induce recognition or influence among others.

• *obtain, process, understand, and communicate* about health-related information needed to *make informed health decisions*

• *obtain, process, and understand* basic health information and services needed to *make appropriate health decisions*

• *communication for the public good*
Define health literacy today?

- A dynamic state of being that’s dependent on an individual’s personal and social experiences with wellness, health, illness.
- Mental, physical changes → health information needs.
- Communication → how people convey needs, access information, and seek recognition that their meaning corresponds to the other’s.
- *Health literacy* studies communication, thought, and other sociobehavioral processes that facilitate knowledge, abilities, and skills to obtain and maintain optimal health and wellbeing.
References


Elwood, WN. (2015, December 8). The literature of health literacy: Over 20 years of science to improve knowledge, skills, and health. NIH OBSSR Connector blog post. DOI: 10.13140/RG.2.1.1070.4726


