Patient information that promotes health literacy

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In this article...

- Why health literacy is important
- How to create effective patient materials
- A checklist of key considerations when compiling materials

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Abstract
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Health literacy is the ability to make informed health decisions in everyday life. For many patients and carers, decision-making is made more difficult by the fact that high-quality information is unavailable to them. The Pulmonary Hypertension Association has created patient materials that promote health literacy to help patients and their families make decisions that are well informed.

Pulmonary hypertension is a complex condition that is managed at nine specialist centres across the UK and Ireland. As the only charity in the UK that is dedicated to supporting people affected by pulmonary hypertension, the Pulmonary Hypertension Association (PHA) UK provides a range of materials to support patients, their caregivers and the health professionals who are treating them. It also aims to ensure that these materials promote health literacy.

What is health literacy?
Many definitions for “health literacy” have been put forward but it is generally accepted to be the ability to make informed health decisions in everyday life (Kickbusch, 2005). For someone to be classed as being health literate they need to:
- Have a basic health knowledge;
- Be able to read, understand and weigh up health information;
- Be able to analyse risks;
- Be able to make calculations and interpretations; and
- Be able to verbally communicate with health professionals.

Who is affected?
A recent European survey found that overall health-literacy levels were poor or could be problematic in around 45% of people, and those most likely to be affected had lower levels of education, were older, had lower social status and lower incomes (European Health Literacy Group, 2012). However, anyone can be affected by poor health literacy, regardless of age, gender, race or even level of education. An individual’s ability to understand health information can be affected by:
- The use of unfamiliar technical language;
- Stress;
- Anxiety;
- Coping with a new diagnosis;
- Onset of illness; and
- English being a second language.

The importance of health literacy
Without adequate health literacy, patients face serious difficulties accessing, understanding and making effective use of health information. Many studies show that there is a strong, independent link between health literacy and health outcomes, with lower health-literacy levels associated with increased:
- Emergency department use;
- Hospitalisation;
- Self-reported physical health problems;
- Mortality (Office of the Surgeon)

5 key points
1. Health literacy is the ability to understand information in order to make informed health decisions
2. Around 45% of people have poor or potentially problematic levels of health literacy
3. Health literacy can improve patient compliance and adherence to treatment
4. Language, design, layout, interactivity, functionality and accessibility are important and must be taken into consideration when compiling information leaflets
5. Testing materials with end users before confirming the final product can save both time and resources

Treatment adherence is more likely if patients can access clear information on their condition, which equips them to make informed decisions about their care.