

Prescriptions for Excellence in HEALTH CARE

A COLLABORATION BETWEEN JEFFERSON SCHOOL OF POPULATION HEALTH AND LILLY USA, LLC

Editor-in-Chief: *David B. Nash, MD, MBA* • Managing Editor: *Janice L. Clarke, RN, BBA* • Editorial Staff: *Dorah C. Meiris, Alexis Skoufalos, EdD*

A Message from Lilly Health Literacy Matters

By *Jack Harris, MD*

How can we expect patients to act on health information they don't understand?

According to the *National Assessment of Adult Literacy (NAAL)*, low health literacy affects more adult Americans than obesity, diabetes, HIV/AIDS, and breast cancer combined.

Health literacy is defined by the Institute of Medicine as: "The degree to which individuals have the capacity to obtain, process, and understand basic health information and services needed to make appropriate health decisions."¹

Health literacy varies by context and setting and is not necessarily related to level of education or general reading ability. A person who functions adequately at home or work may have marginal or inadequate literacy in a health care environment. With the move toward a more "patient-centric" health care system as part of an overall effort to improve the quality of health care and to reduce health care costs, being a patient is becoming more complex than ever.

Today, patients need more than the ability to read and understand important information to manage their health and successfully navigate the health care system. A global set of skills is necessary to access health services, comprehend data and information, speak up and engage openly with health care providers, understand and recall spoken information, problem solve, use technology, critically weigh options, and make decisions.

In addition, many patients need to adopt and maintain complex behaviors over time to manage a chronic disease or condition in order to enjoy the most optimal outcome.

The health literacy problem is a crisis of *understanding* medical information rather than simply being able to *access* information. The health of 90 million people in the United States may be at risk because of the difficulty many patients experience in understanding and acting on health information – which, in turn, has a negative impact on health outcomes and the broader health care system.

How does this affect us all? In general, adults with low health literacy:

- Fail to seek preventive care
- Are less likely to comply with prescribed treatment and self-care regimens
- Make more medication or treatment errors
- Are at higher risk for hospitalization than people with adequate health literacy skills
- May remain hospitalized longer

The issue of health literacy is also fundamental to efforts to reduce health disparities among various segments of the population. Clear health communication techniques can help health care organizations reduce these disparities by ensuring that health information is delivered in easy-to-understand, actionable, and culturally relevant terms.

In alignment with our corporate vision of "Improved Outcomes for Individual Patients," Lilly believes

(continued on page 2)

that clear health communication is a vital component of the health care delivery system in which pharmaceutical companies play an important role. We consulted with nationally recognized thought leaders and partnered with health literacy experts to implement:

- A cross-functional corporate health literacy awareness team
- Internal health literacy awareness events
- Staff and agency trainings
- Communication redesign guidelines
- Pilot testing of resources with consumers
- Strategic planning initiatives

Over time, we strive to ensure that the communications, tools, and resources we develop for patients use plain “living room” language that can help reduce health disparities and improve health communication between patients, providers, and payers.

Admittedly, this is a lofty goal and, as with any transformational journey, we still have plenty of work to do.

According to the American Medical Association, poor health literacy is “a stronger predictor of a person’s health than age, income, employment status, education level, and race or ethnic group.”²

The impact of low health literacy has serious consequences for individual patient outcomes and

the health care system as a whole. This widespread but often unrecognized public health challenge should serve as both a warning and a call to action: Understanding health information is everyone’s right; improving clear health communication is everyone’s responsibility.

*Jack Harris, MD, Vice President,
US Medical Division at Eli Lilly and Company.*

References

1. Neilsen-Bohlman L, Panzer AM, Kindig DA, eds. *Health Literacy: A Prescription to End Confusion*. Washington, DC: The National Academies Press; 2004.
2. Health literacy: report of the Council on Scientific Affairs. *JAMA*. 1999;281:552-557.