Health Policy
NEWSLETTER

Vol. 24, No. 4 | **FALL 2011**

Improving Health Literacy in the Cardiovascular Population: A Regional Approach in Southeastern Pennsylvania

A patient's understanding of a clinician's directions – whether it is basic health information, instructions about medications, or follow-up guidance, is vital to the quality of care, and patient safety and health outcomes. Health literacy is no longer just an interesting topic, it is a significant factor in the dialogue around improving care and impacting the health of populations.

Health literacy is 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 encompasses a range of skills that go beyond the visual and oral, but may also include numeric and computer literacy. It is incumbent upon health care systems and providers to delve deeper into their current practices and understand their role in ensuring and implementing care and guidance that is understandable to patients.

Research suggests that specific patient populations are especially vulnerable to limited health literacy, namely: those who are elderly, of lower socioeconomic status, immigrant and minority populations, and people with chronic physical and mental health conditions. Moreover, limited health literacy can be found within all segments of populations receiving care within our healthcare delivery system.

The National Action Plan to Improve Health Literacy was published in May 2010. The Plan is based on two underlying tenets: (1) everyone is entitled to health information that allows them to make informed decisions about their health care and (2) health services should be delivered in ways that are understandable and beneficial to health, longevity, and quality of life.[2] The Plan's mission is to engage organizations, professionals, policymakers, communities, individuals, and families in a collaborative manner to improve health literacy, and Southeastern Pennsylvania has been challenged to participate.

Recently, the Health Care Improvement Foundation (HCIF),[3] a non-profit quality and patient safety organization in Philadelphia, PA, was awarded a federal Preventive Health and Health Services Block Grant from the Pennsylvania Department of Health to improve cardiovascular health literacy and heart health in Southeastern Pennsylvania. Over the next two years, HCIF, in partnership with Thomas Jefferson University and Jefferson University Hospitals, will lead a regional multi-stakeholder coalition aimed at enhancing health care providers' capacity to address literacy needs and foster improved understanding of cardiovascular health information by adults aged 50 and older.

The ultimate goal of the initiative, named "Southeastern Pennsylvania (SEPA) Regional Enhancements Addressing Disconnects (READS) in Cardiovascular Health Communication," is to educate and encourage health care systems and their health care professionals to address health literacy needs in the cardiovascular patient population. The SEPA-READS project leadership will utilize a multi-pronged approach to achieve its goal:

1. Assess the quality and content of communication across multiple points of care in order to identify areas for focus at each participating hospital;

2. Support pilot projects in health literacy innovations, modification of materials, addressing e-health needs, and community partner programs;

3. Enhance professional development in regional hospitals and health systems by training healthcare providers and other staff; and

4. Activate healthcare consumers through peer-to-peer training sessions and interactions.

Teams of healthcare providers will participate in at least two formal training sessions in each year of the initiative. The training sessions will utilize the American Medical Association Foundation's Health Literacy program,[4] which focuses on an overview of health literacy and its relationship to health outcomes, creating a shame-free environment, and enhancing patient interaction and communication, both verbal and written. Through a train-the-trainer approach, these concepts will be dispersed to other providers within the organizations in order to integrate them as part of the standard practice of care.

Efforts will be undertaken to engage healthcare consumers within the communities served by these hospitals. Informal, educational sessions led by peer activators will be hosted by various community centers serving older adults. The focus of the sessions will be to increase the confidence of individuals to ask questions of their providers about their care plans by utilizing Ask Me 3™, which is a patient education program designed to promote communication between health care providers and patients in order to improve health outcomes.[5] The program encourages patients to understand the answers to three questions:

1. What is my main problem?

2. What do I need to do?

3. Why is it important for me to do this?

Through the efforts of the participating organizations, a Cardiovascular Health Literacy Toolkit, containing a compendium of best practices and health literacy materials, will be developed for dissemination to regional hospitals and community organizations. Additionally, a website related to cardiovascular

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health literacy and containing the toolkit and other references will be developed as an important product of the initiative.

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To obtain more information about the SEPA-READS project, please contact the author at pyurchick@hcifonline.org or 215-575-3742. ■

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