

## Improving Health Literacy in Girona, Spain

Health literacy has been defined 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.”<sup>1</sup> In the United States, low health literacy leads to lower health knowledge, less healthy behaviors, under-utilization of preventive services, poorer health outcomes, and greater healthcare costs.<sup>2</sup> According to a 2012 report from the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 90 million adults in the U.S. are unable to understand or act on health information they receive.<sup>3</sup> The literacy problem is not limited to the U.S. Among the top 23 high income countries, Spain ranked 22nd (the U.S. ranked 16th) in literacy and numeracy (ability to understand and use numbers).<sup>4</sup>

This past summer, I had the opportunity to travel to Spain as a Fulbright Specialist Fellow to work with the University of Girona (north of Barcelona) on a health literacy initiative. The primary focus of the Fellowship was to train university faculty and local health professionals to develop and implement health literacy initiatives. I developed and facilitated a 3-day summer institute on health literacy that was attended by 15 participants from diverse backgrounds and organizations. Institute topics included: defining and measuring health literacy; creating shame-free health literacy environments; developing patient friendly education materials; creating health literacy policies and programs; enhancing patient-provider communication (including “Teach Back”); optimizing organizational websites for low literacy populations; and “way-finding” around health facilities. At the



*Dr. Simmons with participants in the Health Literacy Institute at the University of Girona, Spain.*

patient or consumer level, we discussed strategies to increase consumer engagement and prepare for a healthcare visit through the use of the “Ask Me 3” program (“What is my main problem?”, “What do I need to do?”, “Why is it important for me to do it?”).<sup>5</sup>

We held several meetings with faculty regarding how to incorporate health literacy education and skills into their undergraduate and graduate programs, and to help them develop potential research initiatives in health promotion (housed within the University’s School of Nursing). We also met with local hospital representatives to discuss strategies to enhance their health literacy initiatives with patients and providers, and held meetings with the local public health promotion program (Dipsalut) in an effort to enhance their current health promotion initiatives, including health literacy. I also collaborated with the Health Promotion Program’s electronic newsletter, Bepsalut, and wrote a short article in

Spanish on health literacy that was translated into the regional language, Catalán.

The institute was based on the five-year health literacy initiative, SEPA READS, funded by the Pennsylvania Department of Health<sup>6</sup> and coordinated by the Health Care Improvement Foundation; Department of Family and Community Medicine, Thomas Jefferson University and Hospital; and Jefferson School of Population Health. The Institute evaluation was overwhelmingly positive and the University of Girona, Health Promotion Program is hoping to collaborate with Jefferson on future health promotion initiatives. Overall, it was a very productive and most enjoyable experience.

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