

Fostering a Healthy Environment for Health Literacy in Canadian Consumers

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Introduction

Health literacy is defined in *Healthy People 2010* 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 is not just knowing how to read. It requires a complex set of skills involving listening, problem solving, and a set of decision making skills that can be overwhelming for many individuals.

Research has shown that low health literacy is often linked to higher rates of hospitalizations and higher costs associated with increased emergency visits and overall health care costs.

The 2007 statistics show 60% of adult Canadians (ages 16 and older) lack the capacity to obtain, understand, and act upon health information and services and to make appropriate health decisions on their own.²

Ensuring culturally appropriate resources are available can sometimes be a significant challenge, however with the growing immigrant population in Canada it is ever more important for consumer health librarians to be diligent in advocating for such resources.

Consumer health librarians are often faced with the challenges of ensuring patients, families, and the public have a good understanding of their health care needs and options. Utilizing their expert knowledge, librarians have the ability to help individuals make informed health decisions.

1. US. Department of Health and Human Services November 2000
2. Health Literacy in Canada: Initial Results from the International Adult Literacy and Skills survey 2007

Background

In March 2008, the Canadian Public Health Agency released its Report of the Expert Panel on Health Literacy titled *A Vision for a Health Literate Canada*. The report found that there were two types of barriers to health literacy: individual and systemic.

Individual barriers included declines associated with aging, low levels of education, having a mother tongue other than English or French, living with disabilities, and social stigma.

Systemic barriers include lack of affordable English or French as a second language programs, confusing or conflicting health information in the media or on the Internet, complex health care system and an increasing demand on patient to manage their chronic illness and share in decisions, and lack of awareness and knowledge about health literacy among health professionals.

On April 24, 2008, the CBC reported that a new study found that when doctors speak to their patients using medical terminology, patients often failed to understand what was being said resulting in confusion about their diagnosis or incorrectly interpreting their condition.

Consumer health librarians are aware of the issues around health literacy for patients. They are collecting resources and initiating services to ensure patients understand the information given to them about their conditions and treatment options.

Statistics

- Five million Canadians have no family doctors
- 55% of Canadians have difficulty dealing with every day reading material, such as: understanding the dosage on a medication label, following instructions on a common household product, and filling out an order form

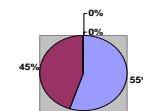


Figure 1: 55 Percent of Canadians who have difficulty dealing with every day reading materials such as: reading and understanding medications labels, following instructions on common household products, filling out an order form

- 32% of foreign-born women and 24% of foreign-born men have extreme difficulty with print materials.
- Only 12% of Canadians over the age of 65 have adequate health literacy skills
- Approximately 50% of Canadians with disabilities experience literacy barriers
- 58% of people who use Internet at home, go online at some point to search for health information

How Consumer Health Librarians can help

- When assisting the public use plain language and simple phrases.
- Collect print materials at different literacy levels.
- Collect and offer non-print resources.
- Offer health information sessions where the public can listen to experts and ask questions.
- Provide training for the public on how to locate and evaluate health information on the internet.
- Provide information about family literacy services.
- Develop plain language materials with input from target audiences.
- Provide culturally relevant health information and translations when available.
- Provide vision aids within libraries.
- Offer special health resources and information sessions targeted to seniors and people with disabilities.
- Partner with public health agencies, local literacy organizations, and health associations to advocate for improved health literacy.

Initiatives

- Trillium Health Centre's Health Information and Wellness Centre and Diversity Services located in Mississauga, Ontario has two health information helplines, one for the Chinese community and the other for South Asian clients. Currently answered by voice mail, clients can request information about finding a doctor, health information, accessing books, pamphlets and videos, and an interpreter. (for more information contact Marg Muir at mmuir@thc.on.ca)



- womenshealthmatters.ca has developed *Women Wading Through the Web: A Health Toolkit* to help women find and evaluate health information on the internet. This Toolkit is available online or downloadable in an easy-to-read language and includes lots of good hints. (For more information see: www.womenshealthmatters.ca)
- St. Joseph's Healthcare Hamilton offers a recorded health information service. *The Health Extension* is available 24 hours a day and is written in straight forward language at the grade 6-8 reading level. An excellent service for those who do not have good reading skills. Topics covered include Body Systems and Diseases, Mental Health, Senior's Health, and Therapies/Treatments. (For more information see www.stjoes.ca/extension)
- The Hospital for Sick Children is currently developing a comprehensive approach to review all patient education materials provided to families, providing easy to read information accompanied with detailed diagrams and access to evidenced based resources. (For information see: aboutkidshealth.ca)

Conclusion

The Consumer Health Information Providers Interest Group (CHIPIG) continues to advocate for consumers by providing them with opportunities to access research-based health information.

Our members are well aware of the challenges and issues of health literacy. Many have developed programs or resources to help their clients access the health information in the most appropriate format.

Consumer Health Librarians are experts in assessing the level of health information needed by their clients. Consumer health information centres are often the first place people turn to when they need health information. It is important that Consumer Health Librarians contribute to the policies and programs being developed to address health literacy issues in Canada.

Contact us at: www.chla-absc.ca/chipig