

A Quick Guide to Health Literacy



August 2011



Literacy and Health Literacy at a Glance

Health literacy is about empowering individuals and communities to read, understand and use healthcare information to access services and to better manage any illnesses they experience. As one of the main factors driving health inequalities, health literacy is a continuing source of concern for health professionals. Low levels of health literacy, resulting in the lack of understanding of medication and medical conditions is linked to poor health outcomes.

For many working in this field a more formal definition of health literacy is preferred; “the cognitive and social skills which determine the motivation and ability of individuals to gain access to, understand and use information in ways which promote and maintain good health” (Kickbusch & Nutbeam, 1998).

Health Literacy and Public Health

Health literacy is a key public health concern. People develop their health literacy over time from a wide variety of sources. These may include their family and work settings; education; health providers; health information; the media; social networks; and a wide variety of community-based resources, such as support groups dedicated to smoking cessation and healthy eating.

Work is currently being progressed to place health literacy into a framework to aid understanding of the field. Figure 1 outlines the current thinking on this framework where interventions are categorised as to whether they address cultural/social, educational, health systems, workplace, marketplace or policy level domains.

Under each heading examples of the competencies that might be included are given.

Figure 1: Health literacy domains and competencies (adapted from Kickbusch & Maag, 2008)

Education system - Schools and continuing education institutes play a major role in the fostering of health literacy throughout nations. Children should learn to opt for the healthy choice in everyday life. In this sense, health literacy needs to become a central element on school agendas.

Health-care system - Patient competencies to navigate the health systems and act as an adequate partner to professionals.

Home and community - General health competencies and the application of health-promoting, health-protecting, and disease preventing behaviours, as well as self and family care and first aid.

Workplace operational/working competencies - health protection through accident prevention as well as through the avoidance of industrial or occupational disease, campaigning for job safety and health-promoting work environments, and aiming at an adequate work-life balance.

Political arena - Community member competencies-informed voting behaviour in the political arena, knowledge of health rights, advocacy for health issues, and membership of patients and health organisations.

Marketplace - Consumer competencies to make health decisions in the selection and use of goods and services and to act upon consumer rights if necessary.

Health Literacy Group UK

The Health Literacy Group was established in the UK to build a 'critical mass' of stakeholders with an interest in health literacy research in England; sharing skills, experience and ideas; and supporting the development of evidence on the impact of health literacy in the England. The group's annual report for 2010/11 contains details of health literacy research and development projects being undertaken in England. It can be accessed through their website: <http://www.healthliteracy.org.uk>.

WHO Health Literacy Sub Network

The World Health Organisation has initiated the development of a WHO European Network of healthy cities, health literacy sub-network for interested member cities and national networks. Cities interested in developing the health literacy work programme and sharing good practice include: Liverpool (designated lead city), Preston, Newcastle, Stoke on Trent and Cardiff (UK), Helsingor (Sweden), Tepebasi (Turkey) and Turku (Finland). Further details of can be accessed from franklin@whcaonline.org



Examples of Health Literacy in Use

Skilled for Health: pilot project launched in 2003 to test the feasibility of delivering literacy, language and numeracy learning in a health-improvement setting.

Easy Read: 'How to make information accessible: a guide to producing easy read documents' provides clear guidelines on the production of documents and information which is accessible and easy to read text and pictures. (See Useful Publications)



Useful Publications

The World Health Communication Associates have produced a series of documents which provide further information on health literacy and can be accessed through their website <http://www.whcaonline.org/publications.html> including:

- Health Literacy: Part 1 The Basics: Revised Edition 2011
- Health Literacy: Part 2 Evidence and Case Studies 2010
- Health Literacy Guide Fact Sheets

Kickbusch I and Maag D. 2008. Health Literacy in: Heggenhougen K and Quah S (editors). International Encyclopedia of Public Health, Vol 3. Academic Press, San Diego. pp. 204–211.

Kickbusch I and Nutbeam D. 1998. Health Promotion Glossary. World Health Organization, Geneva. Available at <http://www.who.int/hpr/docs/glossary.html>.

Useful Links:

Health Promotion Glossary
www.who.int/hpr/docs/glossary.html.

World Health Communication Associates
www.whcaonline.org/

Health Literacy Group UK
www.healthliteracy.org.uk

Skills for Health
www.skillsforhealth.org.uk

CHANGE
www.changepeople.co.uk

Talk to us

For general enquiries about this Quick Guide or for more information on North West Employers :

Tom Goodwin

E: tomg@nwemployers.org.uk

T: 0161 241 7110

For more information on the work going on in Central Lancashire :

Jenny Ashburner

Public Health Associate Healthy Communities

NHS Central Lancashire

E: jennifer.ashburner@centrallancashire.nhs.uk

T: 01772 643 174

Talk to each other

Register and start using the regions new virtual communication platform [North West Connex](#) -

www.nwemployers.org.uk/northwestconnex/

Guides in this series:

A Councillors' Role in Public Health

Health Terminology

Workplace Health

Health Reform

Local Government Terminology

Health Inequalities

Health Literacy

