

2007 Health Literacy Summit Summary

Definition of health literacy:

The degree to which individuals have the capacity to obtain, process and understand basic health literacy information and services needed to make appropriate health decisions.

Overview of the day:

The second Wisconsin Literacy Health Literacy Summit was held on June 21, 2007 in Wisconsin Dells. The purpose of the summit was to bring together health care professionals with adult literacy providers to look at the issues of health literacy in Wisconsin. After introductions from State Senator Pat Kreitlow, Wisconsin Literacy Executive Director Michele Erickson and Verizon Great Lakes Regional President Gale Given, Dr. Paul Smith gave a presentation on "Literacy and Health: The Patient's Point of View," Marsha Tait, Senior Vice President of ProLiteracy Worldwide, followed this with an explanation of the findings in the latest National Assessment of Adult Literacy. These presentations can be viewed on the webcast available at www.wisconsinliteracy.org. Workshops in the three key areas of health literacy curricula, health care material readability and The Joint Commission's White Paper finished the morning session. More information about some of these sessions can be obtained from the Wisconsin Literacy website, as well.

Petro Nakonechnyy, a Pharmacist and English Language Learner with Literacy Volunteers – Chippewa Valley, presented a learner's perspective. A panel presented the initiatives currently underway in Wisconsin. Finally, participants attended regional breakout sessions where discussions were held about current health literacy activities and plans for the future.

Highlights from the summit include the following points:

- The statistics related to health literacy are staggering:
 - 47%-51% of Americans are at levels 1 & 2 ("Below Basic" and "Basic").
 - Low health literacy costs an extra \$73 billion annually in 1998 dollars.
 - Patient education materials are generally written at a 10th grade level.
 - Physicians overestimate a patient's ability to understand by:
 - using too much jargon.
 - generally speaking too quickly.
 - using complicated language and sentences.
 - The highest at-risk population due to low level health literacy is the elderly.
 - Men have a lower average health literacy score.
 - The primary source of health information for those with below basic and basic literacy levels is the television or radio.
- Health literacy does not just involve being able to read health materials. It also includes an understanding of the system and how to navigate it.
- Health literacy is an issue that affects everyone.
- Microsoft Word has an easy feature for improving the readability of materials.
- The concept of Universal Design should be applied to health literacy. If things are simpler for everyone, everyone benefits.
- "Ask Me 3" is free and available for all (at: <http://www.askme3.org/>).
 - Patients and providers are taught to ask and answer the same three questions:
 - What is my main problem?
 - What do I need to do?
 - Why is it important for me to do this?

- Health literacy is a patient safety, as well as quality, issue.
 - Creating a safe environment includes trust.
- Health literacy is an issue of making health care equitable for all.
- Health literacy curricula are designed to be literacy curricula (reading, writing, speaking and listening skills) based around health care related issues:
 - how to make an appointment
 - understanding vocabulary
 - helping your family
- Providers can do the following:
 - Create an environment where patients can speak openly.
 - Use plain language.
 - Sit down to get to eye level when speaking with a patient.
 - Use visual models.
 - Use the “teach back” method for instructions.
 - Advocate for more translators.
- Limited literacy skills can result in poor health outcomes, including:
 - increased hospitalizations,
 - less frequent screenings,
 - high rates of disease and mortality, and
 - increased use of the emergency room for routine care.

Regional breakout sessions resulted in the formation of regional health literacy planning committees that will devise regional plans of action to address the problem of low health literacy. Future summits may be held statewide or regionally depending on future planning. If you are interested in being a part of the health literacy effort in Wisconsin, visit www.wisconsinliteracy.org to find contact information for the Regional Literacy Consultant in your area.