

## UNIT NO. 4

## HEALTH LITERACY – ASKING THE RIGHT QUESTIONS &amp; BROAD CONCEPTS

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## ABSTRACT

The ability to make informed health decisions is a complex process. Knowing when to consult a healthcare professional, understanding one's medical condition and learning how to take medicines correctly require that health information can be accessed, processed and applied effectively by the individual. These statements underpin the concept of "health literacy" which may be defined as the degree to which people have the ability to find, understand, act and communicate health information to make informed health decisions. To communicate at a level that helps patients to make use of health information, there is a need for the healthcare professional to first be able to identify and understand the patient's health literacy by considering age, gender, cultural background, education level, thoughts and behaviours associated with the topic under discussion, and perceived benefits and barriers towards the topic. Five strategies can then be applied for improving that patient's understanding and self management of his or her medical condition: (1) Assess patients' health literacy using open-ended questions; (2) Speak in plain language; (3) Limit the number of teaching points; (4) Use visual aids, and (5) Incorporate the 'teach-back' method to ensure patient understanding.

**Key words:** Informed health decisions, Low health literacy, Health literate person, Health literature information providers, Health literate systems,

open-ended questions, plain language, teach-back method.

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**"The main problem with communication is the illusion that it has occurred."**

– George Bernard Shaw

## BACKGROUND

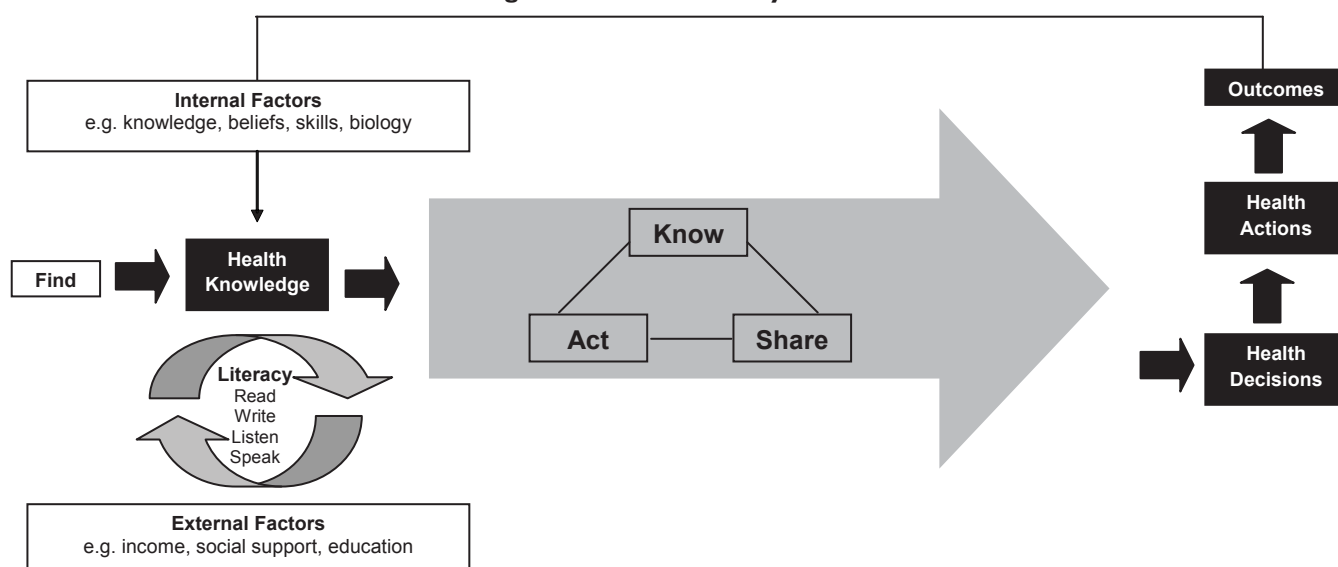
George Bernard Shaw's observation about communication is astute. In healthcare, it is commonplace for patients to lack an understanding of what doctors have explained. Patients are often confused by medical terms, and keep silent rather than ask their doctors questions regarding their health concerns or medical conditions. At the same time, the doctor is under the illusion that he has communicated what needed to be said.

The ability to make informed health decisions is a complex process. Knowing when to consult a healthcare professional, understanding one's medical condition and learning how to take medicines correctly requires that health information can be accessed, processed and applied effectively by the individual.

## WHAT IS HEALTH LITERACY?

Health literacy is the degree to which people have the ability to find, understand, act and communicate health information to

Figure 1: Health Literacy in Context



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make informed health decisions<sup>1,2</sup>. In clinical care, health literacy refers to the set of skills that support the ability to perform reading and numerical tasks for functioning in the health care system and to act on health information<sup>3</sup>.

## HEALTH LITERACY IN CONTEXT

Figure 1 shows the different types of factors that can have an impact on health outcomes.

Health literacy is linked to general literacy skills but evidence has shown there is a large disconnect between both capabilities. For instance, in the US, literacy levels are above 90%, yet the National Assessment of Adult Literacy in 2003 showed that approximately one-third of the population have basic or below basic skills to manage their health.

## WHY IS HEALTH LITERACY IMPORTANT?

Research has shown that low health literacy has a significant impact on an individual's health and the healthcare system.

### Low literacy

Low health literacy affects as many as 9 out of 10 adults resulting in:

- the poor use of preventive services and management of chronic conditions
- an increase in preventable hospital visits and admissions, and
- misunderstanding of prescriptions, poor compliance and medication errors<sup>4</sup>.

Increased healthcare costs

- A study in the United States estimated that the cost of limited health literacy to the economy was somewhere between US\$106 to \$236 billion dollars, each year<sup>5</sup>.

### What does it mean to be health literate?

There are three aspects here.

(1) A **health literate** person has the skills required to find, understand, evaluate, communicate, and use information to make decisions related to his/her health. Health literacy can be viewed as a personal asset from the public health perspective as it enables individuals to take greater ownership of their health<sup>6</sup>; low levels of health literacy is a risk in clinical care that needs to be addressed, as patients with limited literacy skills have poorer compliance and are less able to self manage diseases<sup>6</sup>. Often this group of patients display no visible signs they are unable to process the health information given to them<sup>7</sup>.

(2) **Health literate information providers** are able to present information in a way that is easy to understand and improves a person's ability to act on it. Providers of reliable health

information to the public, need to develop a practice that is sensitive to differences in health literacy can lead to improved access to health care, a practice that can have more productive interactions with their patients, that will result enhanced capabilities for self-management, better compliance and ultimately improved clinical outcomes<sup>6</sup>.

(3) **Health literate systems** provide ready access to and delivery of health information and health services in a supportive environment.

### Health literacy beyond words

Health literacy goes beyond words. The ultimate goal of a health literate person is to make informed health choices which requires them to have the skills to do the following:

#### Access information

- Do I know where to find out more about my health condition?
- Who to ask?
- What questions to ask?

#### Evaluate information

- What do my results mean?
- Is the information reliable?
- What do I do next?

#### Communicate information

- Am I able to share what I have learned?

## EFFECTIVE PATIENT-PROVIDER COMMUNICATION

First, be able to identify and understand your patients by considering their:

- Age
- Gender
- Cultural background
- Education level
- Thoughts and behaviours associated with the topic
- Perceived benefits and barriers towards the topic.

Second, there are five strategies that can be applied for improving patients' understanding and self-management of their condition:

1. Assess patients' health literacy using open-ended questions,
2. Speak in plain language,
3. Limit the number of teaching points,
4. Use visual aids, and
5. Incorporate the 'teach-back' method to ensure patient understanding<sup>8</sup>.

### 1. Use open-ended questions

Using open-ended questions can help uncover what the patient already knows about their condition and their attitudes towards it. See Box 1. With a better understanding of your patient's knowledge, attitudes and behaviour, it is easier to provide more personalised advice which can be more effective and produce better results<sup>7</sup>.

### 2. Speak in plain language

Plain language is a way of organising and presenting information so that it is easy for your patient to understand<sup>9</sup>. See Box 2. When possible, avoid using medical jargon and replace the terms with simpler alternatives like heart disease instead of cardiovascular disease<sup>10</sup>. It is also good to use the active voice and personal pronouns when giving instructions so that patients are more likely to understand how the information relates to them<sup>9</sup>.

### 3. Limit the number of teaching points

Being able to comprehend and encode information is a complex process and individuals only have limited memory storage. For this reason, it may help patients to better recall health information if they are given three teaching points at each appointment<sup>11</sup>. Two other techniques to help information for patients move from short-term to long-term memory are: associating health information with what patients already know and repeating key messages throughout your interaction with them<sup>7</sup>.

### 4. Use visual aids

When explaining complex health information, pictures and visual aids can improve comprehension, recall and adherence<sup>12</sup>. Sometimes, it may be difficult to find alternative words to replace medical terminology. In such instances, it is particularly useful to use images during explanations. Images should also be accompanied by the appropriate label to avoid misinterpretation<sup>13</sup>.

### 5. Use the 'Teach-Back' method

The teach-back method is a simple process that allows you to check that the patient has understood what you have explained to them. The four steps of the teach-back method are:

- 1. Explain:** Explain concepts using a caring tone of voice and attitude, and applying plain language
- 2. Assess:** Ask the patients to demonstrate their understanding of the concept using their own words
- 3. Clarify:** Recap any points that the patient may be unclear about
- 4. Understanding:** The patient is able to successfully teach-back the concept

Incorporating teach-back may seem challenging or time-consuming at first, but applying the technique with one or two patients a day can help you to make this method part of your routine<sup>8</sup>. Box 3 shows examples of teach-back questions.

#### Practical issues related to teach-back method

Box 1. Examples of questions to ask	
Close-ended question	Open-ended question
'So you're still taking medication x and y, right?'	'What are you doing at home? What's your daily routine with your medicines?'
	'Just so I get it right, what are you taking and how much?'

Box 2. Examples of plain language advice	
Non-Plain Language	Plain language
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>× 'Medicine should be taken at mealtimes'</li> <li>× 'The patient will feel better after 24 hours'</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>√ 'Take your medicine at meal times'</li> <li>√ 'We believe you will feel better after 24 hours'</li> </ul>
• Passive voice and third person are used	• Active voice and personal pronouns are used

### Box 3. Examples of Teach-back Questions<sup>13</sup>

- "I want to be sure I explained everything clearly. Can you explain it back to me so I can be sure I did?"
- "What will you tell your husband about the changes we made to your blood pressure medicines today?"
- We've gone over a lot of information, a lot of things you can do to get more exercise in your day. In your own words, please review what we talked about. How will you make it work at home?"

- **Issue 1:** The ‘teach-back’ method is very time-consuming and does not work in a very busy clinic-setting.
- **Solution:** With practice, using the ‘teach-back’ can become part of your routine and does not necessarily lengthen the patient-provider interaction.
- **Issue 2:** It may appear condescending or disrespectful if I ask a patient to teach-back what I just taught them.
- **Solution:** Try phrasing the question differently. Instead of saying ‘Now, show me how you will use this at home’ it may be more effective to ask ‘What will you tell your husband/wife/children when you get home?’

## CONCLUSIONS

Improving communication with patients is a mutually beneficial endeavour as both physicians and patients will enjoy the benefits of better disease management and meaningful patient-provider interactions. An understanding of the patient’s health literacy level is important. We need to help them use information more effectively using the 5 strategies of effective communication. With a growing ageing population and the rising incidence of chronic conditions in Singapore, seeking to have productive interactions with your patients will help them to manage their conditions better, improve their quality of life and in the long-term, reduce some of the burden on the healthcare system.

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## LEARNING POINTS

- **The ability to make informed health decisions is a complex process.**
- **“Health literacy” may be defined as the degree to which people have the ability to find, understand, act and communicate health information to make informed health decisions.**
- **There is a need for the healthcare professional to first be able to identify and understand the patient’s health literacy by considering age, gender, cultural background, education level, thoughts and behaviours associated with the topic under discussion, and perceived benefits and barriers towards the topic.**
- **Five strategies can then be applied for improving that patient’s understanding and self management of his or her medical condition: (1) Assess patients’ health literacy using open-ended questions; (2) Speak in plain language; (3) Limit the number of teaching points; (4) Use visual aids, and (5) Incorporate the ‘teach-back’ method to ensure patient understanding.**