

4.3.1 HEALTH LITERACY

Gordana Pavlekovic, MD, PhD, Assistant Professor

Andrija Stampar School of Public Health, Medical School, University of Zagreb, Croatia

Education and literacy: The key determinants of health

Health researchers and health care professionals from both the developed and developing countries, have been concerned about the link between health and education (1, 2). Kickbusch mentioned that „education and literacy rank as key determinants of health, along with income and income distribution, employment, working condition and the social environment“ (3). Mazaar stressed the importance of knowledge, learning and education as prerequisites for development of societies in the 21st century (4). Nutbeam states that „education has been an essential component to promote health and prevent diseases throughout centuries (5).

However, the facts from the UNDP, UNESCO and OECD, cited by Kickbush, describe the world's situation as follows (3):

- There are an estimated 876 million illiterate adults in the world (~ 25% of the world's adult population);
- More than 130 million children in the world are not enrolled in school;
- Even in the developed countries, ~ 100 million people are functionally illiterate.
- 88% of all internet users live in industrialized countries which account for 15% of the World population;
- Four out of five websites are in English while only one in 10 people speak this language.

The Canadian Health Report „Towards a Healthy Future“ states „literacy levels, which are usually but not always, related to levels of education, are important predictors of employment, active participation in the community and health status. They are also important predictors of the success of a nation“(6).

Literacy and Health literacy: Challenges in terminology

Literacy

Definition of health literacy starts from the definition of *literacy*. The traditional understanding of literacy defined general literacy as a person ability/capacity to read, write and have numeric skills. However, general literacy involves a complex set of abilities to understand and to use a variety of skills needed for one person to function in society. The Centre for Literacy of Quebec (CLQ) defines literacy as „a complex set of abilities to understand and use the dominant symbol system of a culture for personal and community development“(7).

The Canadian Education Research Information System has defined six skills needed for an adult to function in society (8):

- Quantitative literacy
- Scientific literacy
- Technological literacy
- Cultural literacy
- Media literacy and
- Computer literacy.

Literacy experts defined three types of general literacy (9):

- Basic/functional literacy: basic skills in reading and writing, the ability to use printed and written information to function in society;
- Communicative/interactive literacy: advanced cognitive skills which, together with social skills can be used in everyday activities;
- Critical literacy: advanced cognitive skills which, together with social skills, can be applied to critically analyse information.

Health literacy

Therefore both health and literacy are dynamic concepts that influence our ability to function in modern society, it is important to add the seventh skills – health literacy.

One of the simplest definitions of health literacy, given by The Centre for Health Care Strategies in 2000, is based on general basic/literacy definition: „Health literacy is the ability to read, understand and act on health care information“(10). It means that this proposed health literacy definition includes „the ability to apply reading and innumeracy skills in a health care setting“. These skills include the ability to:

- Read consent forms, medicine labels and other written health care information;
- Understand written and oral information given by health professionals:
- Act upon necessary procedures and directions (medication etc.).

This definition has been focused on medical and health care settings. In contrast, the US Healthy People 2010 link health literacy to the promotion of health and preventive behaviours. They defined health literacy as: „The capacity to obtain, interpret and understand basic health information and services and the competence to use such information to enhance health“(11). Unfortunately, this definition did not include that health literacy is not only a personal characteristic, but also a key determinant of population health.

The first formal health promotion definition of health literacy is given by WHO in Health Promotion Glossary, 1998:

„Health literacy represents 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“(12).

Nutbeam, as the author of this definition, wrote his comment as follows: “Health literacy implies the achievement of a level of knowledge, personal skills and confidence to take action to improve personal and community health by changing personal lifestyles and living conditions. By improving people’s access to health information, and their capacity to use it effectively, health literacy is critical to empowerment. Health literacy is itself dependent upon more general levels of literacy. Poor literacy can affect people’s health directly by limiting their personal, social and cultural development, as well as hindering the development of health literacy“(12).

Health literacy as a central pillar in health promotion

Health literacy is not only a personal characteristic; it is also a key determinant of population health. Gastein Health Declaration in 2005 urged policy-makers, researchers and public health professionals to lead the way in making health literacy a central pillar of its policies and actions at European, national and local level. In explanation why health policy is so important they mentioned that:

- Health literacy is the essential life skill for individuals: it may help individuals and communities seek and use information and take control over their health (empowerment);
- Health literacy is a public health issue: building health literacy improves overall people's health,
- Health literacy is an essential part of social capital: low health literacy is a strong contributor to health inequalities;
- Health literacy is an important economic issue: people with low literacy are more likely to use health services, less likely to be compliant with medicines and to use preventive service and incur higher health care costs (13).

The last but not the least, the message is given to professionals: „To be a health literate society, we need a health literate public but also health literate health professionals, politicians and policy-makers“(14).

Exercises

Task 1.

Carefully read the paper and make your own definition of literacy and health literacy. Share your definition with others and make group consensus on health literacy definition (in your own language).

Task 2.

Using available data from Internet, compare your country with other European countries (adult literacy rate and youth literacy rate, differences between male and female, number of children out-of-school, etc). Discuss the differences, if any.

Task 3.

In small groups to develop local/national strategies to improve health literacy applying concepts and principles described in recommended readings.

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