A medical misunderstanding

The effect of low health literacy on health care.

BY JENNY SEWELL

Health care, as we know it today, is far different — and far more complicated — than it was even 25 years ago. The implementation of various cost-saving measures such as formularies, provider networks and co-pays, as well as advances in medical technology and the increased use of prescription drugs, can sometimes transform what should be a straightforward quest to stay healthy into a production worthy of Hollywood. For those with low health literacy, the challenge can be overwhelming.

Dr. Marvin Singleton, a Missouri State Senator and Chair of the Public Health and Welfare Committee — and a practicing physician — knows firsthand the impact of low health literacy on the provision of health care. “A patient of mine who I was sure understood my instructions for taking his medication was admitted to the hospital only a week after I talked to him. It turned out his daughter was telling him when to take his pills and, when she went out of town, he was so afraid he would do something wrong he stopped taking his medicine altogether.”

What is ‘Health Literacy’

Health literacy is more than being able to read health-related materials; it is the set of skills an individual needs in order to read, understand and act on basic health care information. Low health literacy encompasses cultural differences, knowledge of a language, education level, and readiness to comprehend medical instructions and dialogue.

Who is most at risk?

Low health literacy does not discriminate. Today’s healthcare environment is as likely to pose challenges for college graduates as it is for high school dropouts. However, because of the positive relationship between low literacy and the ability to understand and act on health care information, certain populations are almost certainly more at risk.

The Elderly: As people age, the likelihood of suffering from multiple health conditions increases tremendously. Complicated treatments force seniors to absorb a lot of new information in a short amount of time. Some key factors, however, work against their ability to learn:

• The possibility of little formal schooling prior to entering the workforce
• A deterioration in reading, math, and problem-solving abilities from lack of use
• Stress and anxiety associated with aging and illness
• Sensory changes such as loss of
Why is low health literacy a problem?

Low health literacy affects health care by increasing costs, compromising quality, and limiting access.

Low health literacy significantly increases health care expenditures. According to a study by the National Academy on an Aging Society, the cost of low health literacy in the United States could be as much as $73 billion annually. Of this amount, it is estimated that 39 percent is for additional Medicare expenditures and 14 percent is for increased Medicaid costs.

Quality of care relies implicitly on successful communication between the patient and the health care provider. Because low health literacy limits such communication, its impact on quality is inevitable.

Low health literacy compromises access to timely and appropriate care as well, especially given the complicated nature of the modern health care system. Managed care, for example, requires patients to actively participate in their care. The skills necessary to do this — reading comprehension, listening comprehension, prioritizing, synthesizing data from multiple sources, decision-making, and writing — may lead those with low literacy to avoid seeking care until they are so ill they show up in the emergency room.

What are states doing to address this issue?

State response varies from simplifying Medicaid enrollment forms to informational sessions at senior centers on state-sponsored prescription drug programs.

In Massachusetts, for example, the state has established a dedicated, multilingual toll-free number to assist in enrollment. Callers who indicate they speak a language other than English or Spanish are connected to an interpretive language line service. Over 140 languages and related dialects are accessible through this service. “It is vital callers have universal access to effective information about MassHealth, and that the information is easily understood and communicated in a language that is appropriate for individuals with low literacy,” said Sheila Sullivan, Director of the Division of Medical Assistance in Massachusetts.

Alabama incorporates artwork in its educational materials to help those with low literacy skills better understand their health condition. According to Robin Rawls, Associate Director, Research and Development, for Alabama Medicaid Agency, “Use of culturally appropriate, medically accurate photographs and artwork enhances patient compliance. For example, body organs are shown in the context of the entire body to facilitate understanding. Artwork must clearly reinforce the message by illustrating the desired behavior so even if the words are not understood, the photographs can convey the correct message. Good use of artwork appears to increase the likelihood that materials will be picked up and read.”

Results have not always been as hoped, however, although states are continuing to search for solutions. For example, many states have found that training agency staff results in a higher level of sensitivity to the issue of low literacy. Unfortunately, a high turnover rate among these employees lessens the effectiveness of this tool.

Conclusion

Navigating the modern health care environment tests even the most educated in our society. For those with low health literacy, difficulties in accessing and understanding care may discourage participating in care at all, or may result in them only seeking care for acute conditions.

Many states recognize the potential costs savings associated with better health literacy, as well as possible improvements in quality and access, and are instituting programs to address this issue. Successes in some states can help inform efforts in others. Just as with literacy in general, however, there is much room for improvement with regard to health literacy in the United States.

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