Health literacy – the ability to read, understand and act on health information – is essential for anyone trying to navigate today’s complicated health care system. Without a basic level of skills, individuals with low health literacy face barriers to accessing care and achieving positive health outcomes. As a result, these individuals are likely to have higher health care costs.

Throughout the country, state policy-makers have started to recognize that many of those most at risk for low health literacy – seniors, low-income people and the chronically ill – are the same people who qualify for enrollment in public health care programs such as Medicaid, the State Children’s Health Insurance Program (SCHIP) and Medicare. In response, several states have undertaken initiatives or passed legislation to address low health literacy.

Administered by the Office of Adult Literacy, Department of Technical and Adult Education, Georgia’s Health Literacy Pilot Project is a unique educational program that uses health information – such as insurance applications, dosage instructions and health guidelines – to improve literacy skills in adults.

“The curriculum incorporates instruction on information gathering, asking appropriate and informed questions, and decision-making competency,” said Kim Lee, director of assessment and evaluation and GED administrator for the Office of Adult Literacy.

During the first session, the instructor administers the TOFHLA – the Test of Functional Health Literacy in Adults. This test measures each student’s health literacy by evaluating numeracy and reading comprehension skills. Using the results, the teacher is better able to plan class activities and tailor lessons to meet students’ needs. Themes covered in the class include the following:

- understanding the content of medical forms;
- identifying ways to pay for medical care;
- identifying health resources and services in the community;
- understanding medicine labels and prescription directions;
- effective verbal and nonverbal communication skills for health;
- understanding the influence of culture-based beliefs on health-related behaviors;
- demonstrating strategies for preventing common illnesses;
- maintaining safety at home and at work;
- understanding nutrition for good health.

Project designers hope that the classes, now offered at 12 sites throughout the state, serve as a gateway to adult literacy for participants, a way to attract individuals who have low literacy skills but who have not previously attended adult education classes.

Instructors at each site are responsible for recruitment and are encouraged to partner with community organizations to increase awareness of health literacy and identify individuals who would benefit from the class. When partnering with the medical community, project staff found it was important for doctors to understand that the purpose was not to teach health education or to interfere with the physician-patient relationship.

“Doctors want their patients to take
their medicine every eight hours. Adult literacy teachers want students to know how to tell time. Using prescription drug dosing instructions to teach this skill is a win-win for everyone,” said Amy Jones, health literacy coordinator for the Office of Adult Literacy.

Efforts are currently underway to determine program outcomes by comparing pre- and post-test TOFHLA scores and by tracking the number of participants who go on to enter the Adult Literacy Program and complete Georgia’s GED program. “We know that many do transition into adult basic education programs,” Lee said, “and the future of the program looks good.”

State policy-makers play an important role in assisting individuals with low health literacy. Through policies mandating that health materials should be prepared at a certain grade level or in multiple languages, or informational campaigns that increase awareness among health care providers, state leaders can improve health communication. Legislation passed in Maryland and Louisiana in 2003 illustrates first steps in responding to this issue.

In order to evaluate how low health literacy affects the state, in 2003, the Louisiana Legislature passed HB 2019 to create the Interagency Task Force on Health Literacy. The task force is charged with:

- examining how low health literacy affects access to care and use of services;
- identifying groups at risk for low health literacy; and
- determining if providing appropriate health information and improving overall health literacy would increase efficiency and decrease expenditures.

Based on this examination, the task force will present recommendations to the Legislature by December 15, 2005.

In Maryland, legislators recently passed a bill to address disparities among racial and ethnic groups. According to a recent report by the Institute of Medicine, *Unequal Treatment: What Healthcare Providers Need to Know About Racial and Ethnic Disparities in Healthcare*, even when factors such as level of insurance and ability to pay are considered, racial and ethnic minorities receive lower quality care than whites.

In response, Maryland passed HB 883, the Health Care Services Disparities Prevention Act. This legislation encourages state colleges and universities that train health care professionals to offer classes that increase awareness of the issue, including the role of health literacy. The bill also urges courses or seminars for those individuals who are required to participate in continuing education to maintain licensure.

“Good communication is essential,” said Delegate Shirley Nathan-Pulliam, lead sponsor of the bill. “When people understand how to take their medication, for example, or what their diagnosis is, they are able to take better care of themselves. From this comes improved health outcomes.”

The Council of State Governments is at the forefront in analyzing states’ roles in improving low health literacy. In 2002, CSG conducted the *National Survey on Health Literacy Initiatives* to find out what states are doing to improve health literacy or to make the health care system easier to navigate for someone with low literacy skills. Results from the survey were reported in CSG’s *State Official’s Guide to Health Literacy*.

To complement the guide, CSG has recently published a Health Literacy Tool Kit. The kit contains:

- “Kids are the Key: Elementary and Secondary Health Literacy Education” Issue Brief.
- “Teaching Health Literacy: Adult Education Initiatives” Issue Brief.
- Health Literacy Fact Sheet.

Using information from the guide and the tool kit, state leaders can learn why health literacy is important, what states have done to address the issue, and what they can do in their state.

For more information about health literacy at CSG, please visit www.csg.org (keyword: Health Literacy) or contact Jenny Sewell at (859) 244-8154 or jsewell@csg.org.

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