AHIP
America's Health Insurance Plans

Health Literacy: A Toolkit for Communicators

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For more information, please contact:
Susan Pisano
Vice President, Communications
America's Health Insurance Plans
601 Pennsylvania Avenue, NW
South Building, Suite 500
Washington, DC 20004
(202) 778-3245
http://www.ahip.org/healthliteracy

AHIP is the national association representing nearly 1300 members providing health benefits to more than 200 million Americans. Our member companies offer medical expense insurance, long-term care insurance, disability income insurance, dental insurance, supplemental insurance, stop-loss insurance and reinsurance to consumers, employers, and public purchasers.

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Health Literacy: A Toolkit for Communicators

http://www.ahip.org/healthliteracy/toolkit

- **Steps for Initiating or Advancing a Health Literacy Program**
- **Assessment Tools and Resources**
- **Training Programs and Concepts**
- **Technology Resources and Strategies**

Despite growing Information on the magnitude and consequences of low health literacy for quality of care and cost, including recognition that low health literacy is a factor that greatly affects health status, there has been little to assist organizations as they begin and advance their health literacy programs.

Now available for use by professionals in your organization charged with developing health literacy programs, plain language initiatives, and member-experience programs is a toolkit that outlines five fundamental steps to take. The toolkit provides links to important resources and may be especially useful for those just starting up their initiatives.

1. Convene an Internal Group of Stakeholders to Support, Plan, and Carry Out the Work

- Learn about the issue and identify or prepare a background document that defines health literacy and the benefits of addressing it, including who may be helped.

  Key Resources:

  American Medical Association – Health Literacy
  http://www.ama-assn.org/ama/no-index/about-ama/9913.shtml

  Institute of Medicine Report – "Health Literacy: A Prescription to End Confusion"
  http://www.iom.edu/Reports/2004/Health-Literacy-A-Prescription-to-End-Confusion.aspx

  National Center for the Study of Adult Learning and Literacy
  The Health Literacy Environment of Hospitals and Health Centers: Partners for Action: Making Your Healthcare Facility Literacy-Friendly
  http://www.ncsall.net/index.php?id=1163

- It is ideal if you have the support of senior leadership, but many companies have been successful with grassroots efforts that have bubbled up.

- Who are the stakeholders? Anyone in your organization who touches consumers via the written word, spoken word, or the web, as well as those who can bring about policy and operational change to support the effort. This includes: member communications, provider communications, disease and case management, and pharmacy. It also includes your IT team and your legal team.

- In identifying the stakeholders, it may be useful to define health literacy and then consider which departments can facilitate these efforts. Health literacy involves how to obtain information and then how to read, process, understand and act on it.

- It will be important for you to let your colleagues know how low health literacy impacts adverse outcomes and how it relates to and plays out for different disciplines.

- At some point in your process, you will need to have the organizations "blessing" for the work so that those involved can allocate time and other resource to the initiative.

- Early on, it may be useful to decide on a structure (e.g., work plan, goals and objectives, etc.) so that two or three colleagues responsible for leading the work can facilitate or coordinate efforts. Other organizations have found that have a formal structure becomes important quickly.

  Key Resource:

  Center for Plain Language – "Starting a Plain Language Initiative in Your Organization: A Step-by-Step Approach"
  http://www.centerforplainlanguage.org/aboutpl/toolkit.html

AHIP's 2009 Health Literacy Series
http://www.ahip.org/healthliteracy

Part I – Health Literacy Overview and Steps for Implementing Your Own Program

- Background on Health Literacy, Janet Ohene-Frempong, MS, J O Frempong & Associates, Inc.
- The Basic Elements of a Health Literacy Program, Janet Ohene-Frempong, MS, J O Frempong & Associates, Inc.

Part II – Starting Up and Advancing Your Company's Health Literacy Program

- Affinity Health Plan, Lauren M. Hernandez, MPA, Project Manager, Community Health Innovation
- Group Health Cooperative, Jessica Ridpath, Coordinator of Research Communications, Center for Health Studies

Part III – Health Literacy Campaigns

- Aetna Health Literacy Campaign, Carla Espinoza, LVN, CPHQ, Aetna
- Health Literacy Initiatives, Terry Clark, Chief Marketing Officer, Enterprise Marketing, Ovations (a UnitedHealth Group company)

2. Make the Case to Leadership for Moving Ahead

- Borrow from existing presentations that make the business case for moving ahead. When we say "business case" we mean making the case that health literacy has an impact on the health of the populations you serve, a primary business objective of health plans.

Key Resources:

Agency for Healthcare Research and Quality, Health Care Innovations Exchange
Highlights several case studies on health literacy programs implemented in different settings and populations, November 11, 2009 Archive.
http://www.innovations.ahrq.gov

Aetna's Health Literacy Public Policy Perspective
Provides background information on the impact of health literacy on health status and patient-provider communication. It also highlights a few health literacy awareness campaigns launched by Aetna followed by general questions and answers about health literacy and health care.
http://www.aetna.com/about-aetna-insurance/public-policy-perspectives/health_literacy.html

U.S. Dept. of Health and Human Services' Quick Guide to Health Literacy
Page 7.2 lists talking points to make the case for health literacy improvement.
http://www.health.gov/communication/literacy/quickguide/quickguide.pdf

- In making the case, and whenever you talk publicly about health literacy, it is important to include real life stories about the impact of health literacy on individual consumers. These often make a profound impression on those who hear them and sometimes advance an organization or individual's interest more than dry statistics.

  Key Resources:

  Health Literacy Month
  http://www.healthliteracymonth.org

  Health Literacy Month Stories
  http://www.healthliteracymonth.org/hlmonth_stories.asp

  Examples:

  - "Tale from the Front: A Physician's Story" by Karen E. Edison, MD
    Dr. Edison shares two encounters she had with explaining medical procedures and treatments to patients in her dermatology practice. By recognizing the need to use plain language and experiences that patients could relate to, she was able to convey important health information.
    http://www.healthliteracymonth.org/hlm_article.asp?PageID=9171

  - "Family Member Helps 86-Year-Old Iowan Take Control of Her Meds" by Don McCormick
    Marguerite Avant, an 86 year old, experienced difficulty knowing how and when to take her medications. Her great nephew encouraged her to speak with her physician about how to properly take her medications. Marguerite's physician recommended that she create a pill card that included visual representations of her medicine as well as dosage information.
    http://www.healthliteracymonth.org/hlm_article.asp?PageID=9277 .

  National Cancer Institute (NCI) Cancer Bulletin – "In Talking about Prostate Cancer, Medical Language May Confuse Some Patients"
  http://www.cancer.gov/ncicancerbulletin/032409/page3#c

3. Assess the Organization

- Use the tool developed by Dr. Julie Gazmararian of Emory University with support from the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, and working with the AHIP Health Literacy Task Force and individuals at our member companies who are engaged in disparities in health and cultural competency work.
  http://www.ahip.org/healthliteracy

- Do not be discouraged by the comprehensive nature of the assessment. It can be used to assess an entire organization, but also can be used in other ways. For example, you can use it as a guide to long term goal setting, meanwhile focusing your efforts on getting a small win by choosing one of many areas as a starting point.

  Key Resource:

  AHIP's "Connecting with Care: Checklist for Evaluating Plan Websites for User-Friendliness"
  http://www.ahip.org/content/default.aspx?docid=22865

4. Using What You Learn From the Assessment, Develop a Plan that Includes Goals and Measurement of Goals and Adoption of Policies and Procedures.

- In thinking about policies and procedures, you may want to consider adopting a style manual or tool kit that lays out guidelines for written materials, and encouraging a formal policy that it requires its use. Protocols for verbal interactions may also be helpful, as well as guidelines for the web. Policies may also include a requirement that materials be tested, that individuals obtain training, and that vendors be selected on the basis of their capability to support your program.

  Key Resource:

  Harvard School of Public Health – Health Literacy Studies – Designed for professionals in health and education, this website provides practice strategies, tools, resources, and policy reports on health literacy
  http://www.hsph.harvard.edu/healthliteracy

5. Provide Training and Tools to Those Who Interact with Consumers

- Consider the purchase of training programs (or the development of them if you have the resources to do this) for those who create printed/web-based communications and for those who speak to your members.

  Key Resource:

  Health Resources and Services Administration, "Unified Health Communication (UHC): Addressing Health Literacy, Cultural Competency, and Limited English Proficiency"
  This is a free on-line course that focuses on improving patient communication skills, increasing awareness and knowledge of factors that affect communication with patients and implementing patient-centered communication practices.
  http://www.hrsa.gov/healthliteracy/

- There are basic concepts that training should cover, e.g., principles of plain language, the importance of questions (Ask Me 3), the "teachback" method, and active listening.

  Key Resources:

  Partnership for Clear Health Communication—Ask Me 3
  http://www.npsf.org/askme3/index.php

  The Harvard School of Public Health: Health Literacy Studies—Innovative Materials
  This website provides examples of plain language glossaries for chronic diseases (e.g., asthma, lupus, arthritis) and materials for diverse patient populations.
  http://www.hsph.harvard.edu/healthliteracy/innovative.html

- There are existing tools and word lists that can help to simplify language, but it is important to understand that language at a 5th or 6th grade level alone does not ensure readability.

Other Resources of Interest

- Agency for Healthcare Research and Quality, Consumers, and Patients
  http://www.ahrq.gov/consumer/
- Agency for Healthcare Research and Quality, Health Literacy and Cultural Competency
  http://www.ahrq.gov/browse/hlitix.htm
- Center for Health Care Strategies, Inc. – Health Literacy
  Provides definition of health literacy and approaches for developing patient education materials for low literate health care consumers.
  http://www.chcs.org/info-url_nocat5108/info-url_nocat_list.htm?attrib_id=8442
- Hablamos Juntos: Improving Patient-Provider Communication for Latinos
  http://www.hablamosjuntos.org/default.asp
- Health Literacy Missouri
  http://www.missourihealthliteracy.org/
- Health Literacy Universal Precautions Toolkit
  http://www.ahrq.gov/qual/literacy/
- Health Resources and Services Administration, Health Literacy
  http://www.hrsa.gov/healthliteracy/
- Institute of Medicine's Roundtable on Health Literacy
  http://www.iom.edu/Activities/PublicHealth/HealthLiteracy.aspx
- Minnesota Health Literacy Partnership
  A program of the Minnesota Literacy Council, this statewide collaboration of health plans, providers, and community groups offers resources on the business case for health literacy, a train-the-trainer program for health care professionals, and more. Functions as the program arm of the Minnesota Literacy Council with participation from multi-stakeholders including health plans, health care consumers and literacy groups.
  http://healthlit.themlc.org/
- National Library of Medicine: "Easy-to-Read Health Materials"
  http://www.nlm.nih.gov/medlineplus/easytoread/easytoread_a.html
- National Network of Libraries of Medicine, National Library of Medicine: Health Literacy
  http://nnlm.gov/outreach/consumer/hlthlit.html
- Plain Language: Improving Communication from the Federal Government to the Public – "Popular Topics: Improving Health Literacy"
  http://www.plainlanguage.gov/populartopics/health_literacy/index.cfm
- Plain Language: Improving Communication from the Federal Government to the Public – "Why Plain Language? Benefits of Plain Language"
  http://www.plainlanguage.gov/whyPL/benefits/index.cfm

- RAND's Q-DART® - Tools for Assessing and Responding to Disparities in Health Care Quality – "Predictive Model for Measuring Health Literacy"
  In Missouri, a predictive model of health literacy is being developed to estimate levels of health literacy in small geographic areas using the Q-DART GIS mapping and indirect estimation tools.
  http://www.rand.org/health/projects/qdart/toolset/predictive-model-for-measuring-health-literacy.html
- Doak CC, DoakLG & Root JH (1996) Teaching Patients with Low Literacy Skills, 2nd Ed., Philadelphia, PA: J.B. Lippincott.
- U.S. Department of Health & Human Services, National Action Plan to Improve Health Literacy
  http://www.health.gov/communication/HLActionPlan
- U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Office of Disease Prevention and Health Promotion, Health Communication Activities
  http://www.health.gov/communication/literacy/

Pharmacy/Medication Adherence

- How to Create a Pill Card
  http://www.ahrq.gov/qual/pillcard/pillcard.htm
- Automated Telephone Reminders
  http://www.ahrq.gov/qual/callscript.htm

Health Information Technology

- Agency for Healthcare Research and Quality
  Accessible Health Information Technology (HIT) for Populations with Limited Literacy: A Guide for Developers and Purchasers of HIT
  http://healthit.ahrq.gov/portal/server.pt/gateway/PTARGS_0_3882_803031_0_0_18/LiteracyGuide.pdf
- National Library of Medicine
  Making Your Website Senior Friendly
  http://www.nlm.nih.gov/pubs/staffpubs/od/ocpl/agingchecklist.html
- U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, National Institutes of Health
  Helping Older Adults Search for Health Information Online: A Toolkit for Trainers
  http://nihseniorhealth.gov/toolkit/toolkit.html

Developing Print Materials

- Agency for Healthcare Research and Quality
  Talking Quality Resources – Tips on Writing a Quality Report
  http://www.talkingquality.ahrq.gov
- Group Health Research Institute
  Program for Readability in Science and Medicine (PRISM) Readability Toolkit
  http://www.grouphealthresearch.org/capabilities/readability/readability_home.html

- National Cancer Institute
  Clear and Simple: Developing Effective Print Materials for Low Literate Readers
  http://www.cancer.gov/cancerinformation/clearandsimple
- RWJF's Covering Kids and Families/MAXIMUS
  Health Literacy Style Manual
  http://coveringkidsandfamilies.org/resources/docs/stylemanual.pdf
- U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Quick Guide to Health Literacy
  http://www.health.gov/communication/literacy/quickguide

HEALTH EDUCATION MATERIALS

- ACP Foundation
  Living with Diabetes: An Everyday Guide for You and Your Family
  http://foundation.acponline.org/hl/diabguide.htm
- ACP Foundation
  Health Tips: What You Can Do (in English and Spanish)
  http://foundation.acponline.org/hl/htips.htm
- Agency for Healthcare Research and Quality
  Questions Are the Answer
  http://www.ahrq.gov/questionsaretheanswer/index.html
- Agency for Healthcare Research and Quality
  Consumer Materials (e.g., Staying Healthy, Choosing Quality Care, etc.)
  http://www.ahrq.gov/consumer/
- American Academy of Pediatrics
  Plain Language Pediatric Education: Handouts for Common Pediatric Topics
  https://www.nfaap.org/netforum/eweb/dynamicpage.aspx?site=nf.aap.org&webcode=aapbks_productdetail&key=b26c2f09-26d3-4ba0-84b4-850d5785a9e4
- National Library of Medicine
  "Easy-to-Read Health Materials"
  http://www.nlm.nih.gov/medlineplus/easytoread/easytoread_a.html
- U.S. Committee for Refugees and Immigrants
  Healthy Living Toolkit (multilingual health information)
  http://www.refugees.org/article.aspx?id=1851&subm=178&area=Participate

TRAINING

- Agency for Healthcare Research and Quality
  Strategies to Improve Communication Between Pharmacy Staff and Patients
  http://www.ahrq.gov/qual/pharmlit/pharmtrain.htm

- AHIP's Quality Interactions Modules
  Features cross-cultural communication training geared towards physicians, nurses, case managers, and health care employees (non-clinical).
  http://www.ahip.org/disparities/QIModules

- American Medical Association
  Health Literacy Educational Kit, 2007
  https://catalog.ama-assn.org/Catalog/product/product_detail.jsp?productId=prod1060004

- American Medical Association
  Uninformed Consent: What Can Happen When a Patient Does Not Understand the Information You Have Provided?
  http://www.bigshouldersdubs.com/clients/AMA/Consent06.htm

- Health Resources and Services Administration
  Unified Health Communication (UHC): Addressing Health Literacy, Cultural Competence, and Limited English Proficiency
  http://www.hrsa.gov/healthliteracy/

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Suite Five Hundred
Washington, D.C. 20004

202.778.3200
www.ahip.org