



Hoosier Alliance

Hoosier Alliance Is An AmeriHealth Mercy Company

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September 13, 2011

Dear Provider:

Medical terms and treatment instructions can be difficult for any patient to understand — no matter what level of education has been obtained. Couple this with other communication barriers such as language and cultural differences, and it's easy to see how some patients can walk away from their doctor appointments without a clear understanding of their medical condition or the care instructions they've been given.

Consider these statistics from the National Patient Safety Foundations' Partnership for Clear Health Communication:

- **Most health care materials are written above the 10th grade.**
- **One out of five American adults reads at the 5th-grade level or below. The average American reads at the 8th- to 9th-grade level.**
- **Annual health care costs for individuals with low literacy skills are 4 times higher than those with higher literacy skills.**
- **Only about 50% of all patients take medications as directed.**

Although it can sometimes be difficult to break through patient educational and cultural barriers, it's important that we make the effort. Research has shown that physicians who take into account their patients' individual literacy levels and cultural backgrounds – and customize their patient interactions accordingly – are more likely to have patients who comply with their care instructions.

As you consider the diversity of your own patient population, I hope you find the enclosed brochure informative. It outlines interpersonal techniques that can be incorporated when communicating with patients who possess low health literacy. It also provides an overview of how the definition of an acceptable communication style can vary from culture to culture.

If you have any questions, or if I can be of assistance, please call 888-961-3100.

Sincerely,

Mark P. Rollins, MD
Medical Director

Cultural Diversity **Speaking to Each Patient's Uniqueness**

We live in a highly mobile, cross-cultural world. You may find yourself caring for patients whose social practices and communication styles differ greatly from your own. Adjusting your method of expression so it coincides with your patients' will help ensure the health information you provide is heard and heeded. Here are a few tips from the Health Industry Collaboration Effort:

- **Styles of Speech:** Listen to your patients. Adjust your volume, speed and cadence to more closely match theirs.
- **Eye Contact:** Some cultures consider it rude to look directly into the eyes of another person. Think twice before asking a patient to make eye contact.
- **Body Language:** Be mindful of physical distance and touching when interacting with a patient. If you sense a patient isn't comfortable being touched, ask for permission first.
- **Gently Guide Conversation:** How you greet a patient sets the tone for the visit. People from more traditional societies will expect to be formally addressed. Cultural background can also affect whether or not a patient answers questions directly, or through personal anecdote or story.
- **Provide Interpretation Services:** Make note of a patient's preferred language. Federal law requires physicians who have non-English speaking patients to supply interpretive services on-site, at no charge to the patient. If you need assistance finding an interpreter, please consult the MDwise Hoosier Alliance Provider Manual.

Defining Patient Health Literacy

If you're trying to gauge what type of health information your patients would need to know in order to be proficiently health literate, here are some sample criteria from the National Assessment of Adult Literacy.

Proficient

A patient is able to find the information required to define a medical term by searching through a complex document.

A patient can evaluate information to determine which legal document is applicable to a specific health care situation.

Intermediate

A patient can find the age range during which children should receive a particular vaccine using a chart that shows all the childhood vaccines and the ages children should receive them.

A patient can identify three substances that may interact with an over-the-counter drug to cause side effects, using information on the over-the-counter label.

Basic

A patient can give two reasons why a person with no symptoms of a specific disease should be tested for the disease, based on information in a clearly written pamphlet.

Below Basic

A patient can identify how often a person should have a specified medical test, based on information in a clearly written pamphlet.

HA500|HHW-HIPP0088 (7/11)

Are Your Patients Health Literate?



Ensuring Your Patients Understand You Helps Ensure Their Good Health



Low Health Literacy is A Health Hazard

Patients who have both low health literacy and chronic disease know less about their illness and its proper treatment and self-care than do literate patients.

Patients with low literacy skills have a 50% increased risk of hospitalization than their literate counterparts.

According to the American Medical Association Foundation (AMAF), a patient's ability to carry out a treatment or therapy regimen is greatly affected by the doctor's ability to give clear and concise instructions. Studies have shown that when patients understand their medical situation, they have less anxiety, pain and psychological stress. They're also more likely to follow treatment instructions.

Advancing the cause of health literacy among your patients doesn't have to be difficult or time consuming.

The AMAF says that incorporating just six interpersonal techniques into practice interactions can have a big impact on your patients' health literacy.

1. Slow down

Taking just a few extra minutes with each patient will provide you with the opportunity to make sure the health information you're conveying is understood.

2. Use plain language

Most of your patients are probably not familiar with most medical terminology. Use plain language and substitute medical words for more common, everyday words whenever possible. For instance, instead of telling a patient the medicine being prescribed is an anti-inflammatory, tell them it will lessen swelling. Rather than asking them to monitor how their wound is healing, ask them to keep an eye on it.

3. Show or draw pictures

Demonstrations and illustrations are more universally understood than words. While visuals need to be used in concert with verbal explanations, research indicates that pictures can help patients understand spoken instructions.

4. Limit the amount of information provided — and repeat it

It is easier for people to remember information when it is presented to them in small chunks. Provide all the information necessary to treat your patient, but limit it to what is relevant to the patient's current medical state.

After you convey key information, repeat it to help the patient memorize what you've said. It can be helpful for other members of your health care team to repeat the information as well.

5. "Teach-back"

Asking patients to explain in their own words what you've just told them will help verify that your information and instructions are understood. However, don't ask a patient, "Do you understand?" Ask open-ended questions, such as, "Explain to me how you will take your medication."

6. Create a shame-free environment

Encouraging questions is key to creating a comfortable physician-patient relationship. Reassure them it is not unusual for patients to have trouble understanding health information. Invite them to bring a trusted friend or family member with them for support.

Low Literacy is Expensive*

Annual health care costs for individuals with low literacy skills are 4 times higher than those with higher literacy skills.

* Source: Center for Health Care Strategies