

Policy Statement

Health Literacy



About health literacy

Low health literacy affects a person's ability to make informed decisions about his or her health and can result in the ineffective treatment and rehabilitation of a patient's condition. Poor levels of health literacy exist in all countries.

IAPO defines health literacy to include an individual's reading level, as well as language, education level, cultural background, and readiness to receive health information by oral or visual means. All these factors may create barriers to understanding, and therefore to individuals' ability to take action to improve their health. Therefore, health literacy involves both comprehending and taking appropriate action.

A call to all involved in healthcare

All stakeholders who communicate with patients, carers and citizens must realize that low health literacy is a huge problem worldwide, resulting in poor judgements about health options and ineffective treatment and rehabilitation.

These stakeholders include:

- Patients and patients' organizations
- Carers and carers' organizations (including family members)
- Healthcare professionals, practitioners and students (e.g. physicians, nurses, pharmacists)
- Healthcare providers (e.g. hospitals, hospices, home care institutions)
- Governments (at local, national and regional levels)
- Third-party providers (e.g. social security, insurances)
- Healthcare-related services and industries (e.g. pharmaceutical, medical devices, biotechnological)
- Any intergovernmental, non-governmental, quasi-governmental and humanitarian organizations (e.g. WHO, Oxfam) when dealing with health-related issues

Recommendations

1. Stakeholders should extensively review the existing health-related information they produce and the way in which this is communicated. All future materials should be planned according to health literacy principles.
2. All information, whether posters, brochures, pamphlets, audio, video or television material, should incorporate the following:
 - A clear and understandable message

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- Relevant and tailored content
 - Culturally and linguistically appropriate format
 - Reader, viewer or listener involvement
 - Pilot testing on key audiences
3. In providing health-related information, statements or articles to the media, all stakeholders should follow health literacy guidelines and assert that they have done so, noting basic health literacy concepts if possible.
 4. All patients' organizations should insist on health literacy principles being applied to all the communication materials produced by themselves or other stakeholders.

Related Publications and Selected References

IAPO Guidelines: Health Literacy www.patientsorganizations.org/healthliteracy

The Patient's Network Magazine: Health Literacy, Issue 18, June 2003 www.patientsorganizations.org/tpn

IAPO is a unique alliance representing patients of all nationalities across all disease areas and promoting patient-centred healthcare around the world.

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