

WEBINAR: Should we dumb down our language for PH patients? Exploring health literacy in practice

Episode 6 – Thursday 11 October 2018

DISCUSSION SUMMARY

Overview

On Thursday 11 October 2018, Actelion hosted a webinar entitled 'Should we dumb down our language for PH patients? Exploring health literacy in practice'. The webinar featured guest speaker Kristine Sorensen PhD, founding director of the Global Health Literacy Academy in Denmark, who provided an overview of health literacy; addressing why it is important and challenges in its implementation.

The primary objectives of the webinar were:

- To increase understanding of the role of health literacy in people's ability to effectively self-manage
- To discuss strategies for organizing an effective health literacy response to support people of varying health literacy levels and how to check understanding
- To share best practice approaches to improve healthcare professional-patient communication

Discussion summary and key learnings

Health literacy: an overview

- Health literacy is defined as: "linked to literacy and entails people's knowledge, motivation and competencies to access, understand, appraise and apply information to form judgment and take decisions in everyday life in terms of healthcare, disease prevention and health promotion to maintain and improve quality of life"
- In recent years, many groups and networks dedicated to addressing health literacy have formed as health literacy fast becomes a global movement
- There are a vast number of socio-demographic factors that can impact health literacy between patients and healthcare professionals including age, gender, level of education, occupation and income etc. but also general factors including prior knowledge of health topics and individual behaviors
- Common problems that arise with poor health literacy are that:
 - Patients struggle to understand the complexity of their disease and dialogue between patients and staff is hindered
 - Medical professionals struggle to understand their patients' circumstances

Overcoming problems in health literacy: what can we do?

Understand the importance of good health literacy at time of diagnosis

- Conversations at the time of diagnosis are crucial and it is therefore recommended that healthcare professionals are particularly alert to practicing good health literacy at this time
 - It is important to be conscious of how best to deliver messages to patients in an easily digestible way and a good way of checking understanding is to ask the patient to explain their diagnosis back to the healthcare professional
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- Communication should not be rushed in the initial appointment and appropriate time should be given to allow patients to engage with their diagnosis and treatment, and process new information. Inviting a family member or friend to attend this first appointment can be particularly helpful
- At the point of diagnosis, it is advised that healthcare professionals direct their patients towards patient support groups for more information

Implement a human-centred approach in consultations

- Healthcare professionals are well-placed to advise patients on how to access credible health information and should encourage patients to join patient groups for holistic support
- Reassuring patients that questions are always acceptable is an effective way of encouraging more honest and open questions during consultations
- Healthcare professionals should encourage patients to bring friends and relatives to appointments if it makes them feel more comfortable
- Language barriers can be overcome with an interpreter
- Clinicians can invite patients to ask about different treatment options and how they match their needs, reminding them to speak up if they are unhappy with their treatment
- When clinicians prioritize building trust with their patients and understanding their patients' literacy levels they are better able to provide information that patients can easily absorb, which ultimately supports their decision making
- Understand that health literacy and the desired outcome of a consultation differs from person to person – clinicians should try to identify what patients want to know and what they are able to understand

Practical ways to consider health literacy in your institution

- Within your institution, aim to create an environment which encourages patients to be more proactive in understanding and managing their health for example encourage shared-decision making during HCP-patient consultations
- Encourage clinicians within your institution to share (anonymized) best practice examples that demonstrate techniques of improving health literacy in consultations
- Consider assigning 'health literacy ambassadors' within your institution to drive awareness and promote it amongst other colleagues
- Consider how to evaluate health literacy across your institution and how this can be tracked to observe improvement from year to year
- Techniques to improve health literacy can be easily researched online. Consider using such resources and sharing examples which could be the most effective with colleagues

Conclusion

- Poor health literacy is a global problem and needs to be addressed to improve patient care and self-management, as well as the sustainability of healthcare systems
- There are practical tools and techniques that practitioners in a variety of settings can implement to enhance approaches for those with low levels of health literacy
- Establishing best practice approaches and encouraging a paradigm shift in health literacy can be applied at all levels of healthcare to improve overall professional-patient communication

For more information on the health literacy, please refer to the following webpages:

- <https://www.safetyandquality.gov.au/our-work/patient-and-consumer-centred-care/health-literacy/>
- <https://bmcpublichealth.biomedcentral.com/articles/10.1186/1471-2458-12-80>
- <http://www.who.int/global-coordination-mechanism/activities/working-groups/Ten-Health-Literacy-Attributes.pdf>