



# The Role of Public Health in Promoting Health Literacy

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## ABSTRACT

Health literacy, the ability to obtain, process, and understand health information to make informed decisions, is critical to individual and community well-being. This paper examines public health's essential role in promoting health literacy, emphasizing the importance of equipping populations with the knowledge, skills, and attitudes necessary to make sound health decisions. Public health initiatives, partnerships with healthcare providers, and culturally competent health education programs are pivotal to improving health literacy. The review emphasizes the need for strategic policy recommendations to ensure that health literacy becomes a public health priority. By fostering health literacy, public health can improve health outcomes, reduce healthcare costs, and empower individuals and communities.

**Keywords:** Health literacy, Public health, Health education, Healthcare communication, Community health.

## INTRODUCTION

Is there a need to examine health literacy? It is well established that health literacy is inextricably interwoven with community well-being and is, therefore, a matter of public health interest. The aim of this review is to examine the role of public health in promoting health literacy. Public health in practice is about protecting and improving the health of the public. If public health means prevention, then one way public health authorities can promote health is by giving others the means to empower the public with the knowledge, skills, and attitudes people need to be healthy. The importance of promoting health literacy is based on the concept that if individuals have the necessary knowledge and skills, people will be more able to look after their health [1, 2]. In summary, the term health literacy encompasses core concepts including being able to understand, communicate, and apply health information. Health literacy focuses on the demands of tasks and skills individuals need to be able to function effectively within a complex healthcare system. Several imperatives, such as the increasing costs of adverse events due to decreasing health literacy, the erosion of civil society, and advances in health communication research promoting social change, have drawn attention to the need to foster a well-informed population. A major challenge for contemporary public health is the tandem of cultural diversity in its many forms, including different levels of health literacy throughout communities [3, 4].

### Definition and Importance of Health Literacy

Health literacy is generally defined as the degree to which individuals have the capacity to obtain, process, and understand basic health information and services needed to make appropriate health decisions. Yet the nature of health literacy is neither entirely cognitive nor purely domain-specific. Definitions of health literacy often are more comprehensive in scope and consider holistic aspects of human development, encompassing not only cognitive knowledge but also skills, attitudes, and competencies. Health literacy is conceptually original because it blends numerous dimensions of health education and is interpreted from various viewpoints [5, 6]. Cognitively, health literacy is inextricably

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linked with life expectancy and more crucially with quality of life. Health literacy is grounded in a core belief that basic health information equips individuals to protect their health and also depicts the degree to which they are enabled to apply this knowledge through certain critical competencies. It enables people to engage in socially productive activities and realize themselves. Low health literacy is directly correlated with poorer health outcomes and higher rates of hospitalization. Healthcare costs for individuals with low health literacy are significantly higher than for those with higher literacy. Health literacy supports adults in performing specific skills required for sound health. By holding these skills, adults are better prepared to navigate the health care system. Promoting an individual's health literacy is a societal priority. Policymakers, public health professionals, health educators, and manufacturers of medicines and medical devices should share responsibility, along with the individuals who must make thoughtful decisions about their health care. However, health communication takes place within a larger context of cultural behavior and lifestyle. Cultures and lifestyles together determine health beliefs, health-seeking behavior, and attitudes toward health professionals, healing, and medications. Strategies to influence health behavior and help people make sound health decisions frequently have to take into account underlying cultural or lifestyle influences on those decisions. In this regard, crafting health messages that are in tune with the culture and lifestyle of the intended audience and using cultural brokers can contribute to effective health communication. Although the application of this concept shares some similarities, taking cultural considerations into account when developing clear health communication is more than creating plain language health materials or tailoring materials for the intended audience. Developing plain language health messages that are culturally competent requires an understanding of the beliefs, values, customs, and attitudes of the intended population [7, 8].

#### **Public Health Initiatives**

One of the goals of the public health arm of the United States Department of Health and Human Services is to improve health literacy through public health policies and programs. One strategy to improve health literacy at the community level is to develop programs to improve the skills of diverse communities in becoming part of the decision-making bodies within their respective organizations and to increase the capacity of decision-making groups to understand and address the potential health impact of their decisions. The movement towards community-based health promotion efforts, in which the language may easily be transformed from a disease orientation to a health perspective, is important in lay organizing efforts. State health education departments in two locations are under contract to develop state-level initiatives to improve the awareness and knowledge of health professionals about the public health functions of community-based organizations and, through them, communities that work with health facilities. Other public health efforts in the United States and Canada include health promotion and prevention with information about public health and preventive services, the third most frequently provided information services [9, 10]. The goal of health education specialists and health care providers is to help communities become more health literate. Projects exist to help communities develop ways to eliminate some of the barriers that may confront community residents when they want to become more involved with the healthcare system. Several states have mentioned the accessibility of language in their planning for health communications in their needs assessments. Most research focuses on traditional health topics, revealing little ad hoc emphasis on information for the purposes of prevention and health promotion. There are increasing numbers of references to the programs as community education, community assessment/education, or community involvement. Few results are reported, although considerable process information can be gleaned. Emerging from national and state reports is an emphasis on culturally and linguistically relevant and sensitive content for health education messages. Little of this research is reported in mainstream health education journals, and the futurist-like articles are not well represented in the field. The development of strategies to evaluate the extent to which public health and medical literature engages and contributes to health literacy will be important in the overall evaluation of this concept. Developing user-based feedback systems would also be important in understanding the "transparency" of public health and medical literature. Emerging technologies,

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however, including social media and online publishing, provide fresh opportunities for advocacy for healthy living and its defining trait health literacy. Public health professionals, in conjunction with state, community, and academic partners, are well-positioned to educate the public regarding critical health issues and to advocate for necessary policy changes. Nursing and public health schools can offer unique and critically important support and insight in these efforts, providing practitioners, infrastructure, and skills to reach and develop grassroots advocates who can articulate both the need for policy and regulatory change and if there is adequate evaluation of these efforts—the resulting level of increased health literacy [11, 12].

### **Health Education Programs**

This review is focused on health education programs that are conducted under the public health umbrella. The purpose of these instructional programs is to provide important information about health promotion, medical care, and the prevention of diseases and disorders. In the discussion that follows, pertinent principles that should be used when designing these programs are reviewed. We suggest approaches that involve the use of workshops and seminars, outreach initiatives, tours of medical facilities, health risk assessments, communication networks, and the development of printed and audiovisual materials. Health educators must understand the dynamics of the audiences they wish to address [13, 14]. Other factors that affect what is learned occur when human beings come up against health care or public health systems. The need to please the current authority figure persuades individuals to tell their medical providers what they think the professional wants to hear, which affects the information given to patients. Additional demands of patients are more subtle: it is important that doctors and other medical professionals display the same emotions that a patient is exhibiting in a consultative relationship just to make the patient feel comfortable with the patient-provider exchange. The role of a health educator in adding new messages about personal health has been to undo some of the problems, or the misinformation, that exists and to replace misunderstanding with good, factual public service messages. Statements or predetermined messages must be well thought out and carefully designed, taking into account how a patient constructs these same messages [15, 16].

### **Collaboration with Healthcare Providers**

Many agree that partnerships and collaborations between public health agencies and healthcare systems are logical and needed to make comprehensive strides to further health literacy. Public health practitioners and healthcare providers each have unique strengths that, when combined into a mutually supportive collaboration, provide a platform for a systematic approach to health communication. Early research shows promise in these types of collaborations. The strategies reported below have proven to be effective in projects funded by various organizations. In general, CADs and/or CAHDs create the program content and toolkit materials that are then tested in the field for reliability and validity. A healthcare provider's primary focus (time permitting) is providing services to patients, not developing these materials and tools [3, 17]. When public health collaborates with the healthcare system, the result is a partnership where there is a focus on the patients regardless of their origin or care setting. It should be noted, however, that as an organizational model, the MCO-HMO model may not be overly relevant because of changes in how healthcare is now delivered due to the current healthcare data explosion and the market-driven system. Another important factor in the delivery of a recommendation or rendering of advice is often the messenger. Public health has long recognized that a physician is often seen as an exceptionally trustworthy spokesperson for his or her patients, despite the plethora of advertisements for medications, remedies, and equipment in the media. Thus, this model of classifying patients would not be optimal for a program to improve health literacy. So why talk about and focus on healthcare providers? Studies have shown that the lack of proper communication about the patient's health is a repeating underlying cause of patient injury. The research supports the idea that improving communication is one of the solutions to this expensive problem [18, 19].

### Policy Recommendations

As detailed in this review, examples and evidence abound for health education that promotes health literacy. Making a public health case that fosters health literacy through public health infrastructure not only aligns with public health goals established over the past few decades but also greatly complements community-based health education. The division promotes multiple policy recommendations. First and foremost, this review seeks to make the case to policymakers regarding health literacy's place amidst the public health priorities of all levels of government. Health literacy should show up on public health agendas. Moreover, policymakers should be educated about the prevalence of low health literacy and the scope of its impacts, using tools and evidence discussed herein. In addition, health literacy should be addressed in educational curricula. This includes interventions in schools and prerequisite programs of community coalitions with a role in health communication. Additionally, policies that advocate for ongoing continuing education of healthcare providers in effective communication are recommended. Health literacy initiatives and programs receive a portion of the vast money invested in biomedical and public health outcomes research. These initiatives should be consumer-oriented, directly linking investments to research evidence and practice. Policymakers should make health literacy research a health priority, linking health literacy with studies driven by other national health priorities, and federal funding for health literacy initiatives should be oriented to research driven by a strong program rationale. The federal government should also reward collaborations among and between sectors that are traditionally considered social, education, business, and communication imperatives [20, 21].

### CONCLUSION

Promoting health literacy is a vital public health responsibility that can significantly enhance individual and community health outcomes. Public health initiatives aimed at increasing health literacy help reduce health disparities, lower healthcare costs, and empower individuals to make informed decisions regarding their well-being. Collaborative efforts between public health agencies, healthcare providers, and communities are essential to achieving these goals. The implementation of culturally relevant education programs and policy reforms that prioritize health literacy is imperative for building a healthier, more informed society. Public health must continue to innovate and adapt strategies to promote health literacy in a diverse and evolving healthcare landscape.

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