

# Making health literacy part of your policies and processes

A fact sheet for quality managers

**This fact sheet describes how you can embed health literacy in your policies and processes as a means of fostering consistent practice across your organisation. Taking steps to acknowledge and address health literacy within your organisation's policies and processes will also help you meet some of the requirements of the National Safety and Quality Health Service (NSQHS) Standards.**

## Key points

- Strategies to address health literacy should be coordinated, sustainable and embedded within your organisation's systems and infrastructure
- Start creating a positive health literacy environment by looking at how your organisation's policies and procedures address and influence health literacy
- Develop a health literacy policy, or integrate health literacy into relevant organisational policies and processes
- Involve consumers, their family, carers and representatives in the development and review of your organisation's policies and processes.

the issue, and clarify the strategies the organisation will use to ensure that the information and services provided are well understood by consumers.

Embedding health literacy into policies and processes may involve integrating your organisation's expectations around consumer engagement into the development of: policies and processes for consumer involvement in the design, implementation and evaluation of health information and services; an organisation-wide consumer and community engagement plan; or an organisation-wide health literacy policy.

## Why embed health literacy into your organisation's policies and processes?

Health literacy is crucial to the safety and quality of care that your health service organisation delivers. There is good evidence that a mismatch between an individual's level of health literacy and the complexity of the healthcare environment can result in poorer health outcomes and patient experience, and in higher rates of adverse events. Taking steps to embed health literacy into your organisation can help improve this.

Embedding health literacy into your organisation's policies and procedures is a way of fostering consistency, and clarifying the organisation's expectations about how health literacy will be addressed. It can support a shared understanding of



## Where to start

The first step is to be clear about what you are trying to achieve, and to think about the process you can take to improve health literacy within your organisation. The NSW Clinical Excellence Commission has developed a [Health Literacy Guide](#) which recommends that you:

- Identify a goal or objective for health literacy in your organisation
- Do a gap analysis for health literacy in your organisation
- Review current patient information resources
- Investigate how consumers are involved in developing information and how their feedback is used
- Review way-finding within your organisation.

## Assessing the situation

It is important to get a good understanding of how your organisation's current policies and processes address health literacy, and to assess where the complexity may lie in your organisation's environment.

There are many ways that you can do this. You can undertake a desktop review of your policies, interview staff and consumers, or take a more structured approach such as those described below.

### Health Literacy Environment Review

The [Health Literacy Environment Review](#), developed in 2008 by Rima Rudd and Jennie Anderson, can help you to identify the facilitators and barriers to health literacy in your environment. The review includes an audit of navigation, print and verbal communication, technology, and policies and procedures within your organisation.

The findings of this type of review will enable you to identify and discuss priorities for developing an organisation-wide health literacy plan.

### Organisational Health Literacy Self-assessment

The [ENLIVEN Health Literacy Self-assessment tool](#) provides guidance on improving the health literacy environment. Based on the principles of the Institute of Medicine's [Ten Attributes of Health Literate Organisations](#), the checklist assists you to work towards achieving each of the following attributes:

- Has leadership that makes health literacy integral to its mission, structure and operations
- Integrates health literacy into planning, evaluation measures, service users safety and quality improvement
- Prepares the workforce to be health literate and monitors progress
- Includes populations served in the design, implementation and evaluation of health and related information and services
- Meets the needs of populations with a range of health literacy skills while avoiding stigmatisation
- Uses health literacy strategies in interpersonal communications and confirms understanding at all points of contact
- Provides easy access to health and related information and services and navigation assistance
- Designs and distributes print, audio-visual, and social media content that is easy to understand and act on
- Addresses health literacy in high-risk situations, including care transitions and communications about medicines
- Communicates clearly what health plans cover and what individuals will have to pay for services.

## Developing a plan

Once you have assessed how your organisation currently considers and addresses health literacy, you will need to develop an improvement plan. This could be an organisation-wide plan that addresses multiple issues, or you may wish to prioritise the most urgent health literacy concerns and undertake a series of linked improvement projects.

An example of an organisation-wide health literacy plan is the Illawarra Shoalhaven Local Health District's [Health Literacy Framework](#), which outlines the policy for supporting plain English consumer information in their district. It includes their organisational goals and an action plan toward achieving each goal. The goals are:

Goal 1: Embed health literacy into high-level systems and organisational policies and practices

Goal 2: Integrate health literacy into planning and evaluation for clinical and quality improvement

Goal 3: Have plain English health information that is easy to access, read, understand and use

Goal 4: Partner with consumers in the evaluation of health information and access and navigation of services

Goal 5: Have effective and evidence based health literacy strategies in interpersonal communication

The implementation of the health literacy framework spanned several years, focusing on two to three goals at a time.

## Choosing your tools and strategies

There are a range of tools and strategies that you can put in place to address different barriers to health literacy that you may have identified in your organisation.

The Agency for Healthcare Research and Quality has developed a [Health Literacy Universal Precautions Toolkit](#), which provides 21 tools to help organisations and clinicians address health literacy using a universal precautions approach.

The universal precautions approach works on the assumption that it is not possible to know a person's level of health literacy by looking at them, and therefore you must provide information and services in a way that is easy for everyone to understand.

Tools 1 to 3 focus on the early stages of coordinating health literacy improvements such as identifying consumers to be involved and awareness raising activities to complete with staff.

## Links with the National Safety and Quality Health Service Standards

Currently, the National Safety and Quality Health Service (NSQHS) Standards include a number of actions related to health literacy and supporting partnerships with consumers. These actions focus on ensuring that consumers are involved in reviewing information that is prepared within the organisation and that they are engaged in the governance of the organisation.

The NSQHS Standards (second edition) will be released in late 2017 and health services will need to be assessed against this edition when they are accredited from January 2019. The NSQHS Standards (2nd ed.) have a much more overt focus on health literacy. There are new actions in the Clinical Governance Standard that focus on the physical environment, including signage and way-finding. There are also actions within the Partnering with Consumers and Comprehensive Care Standards which focus on developing and providing easy-to-understand information, sharing decision making, engaging in partnerships for care planning, and the delivery of comprehensive goal-directed care.

## Further information

Further information and resources about health literacy, including other fact sheets in this series, are available on the Australian Commission on Safety and Quality in Health Care website.

**Website:** [www.safetyandquality.gov.au/our-work/patient-and-consumer-centred-care/health-literacy/](http://www.safetyandquality.gov.au/our-work/patient-and-consumer-centred-care/health-literacy/).

## Resource list

Clinical Excellence Commission. Health literacy guide. Sydney: Clinical Excellence Commission. Available at: <http://www.cec.health.nsw.gov.au/quality-improvement/people-and-culture/person-centred-care/partnering-with-patients/health-literacy>

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Thomacos, N. and Zazryn, T. Enliven Organisational Health Literacy Self-assessment Resource. Melbourne: Enliven & School of Primary Health Care, Monash University, 2013. Available at: <http://enliven.org.au/sites/default/files/Enliven%20Health%20Literacy%20Audit%20Resource.pdf>

Brach, C., Dreyer, B., Schyve, P., Hernandez, L.M., Baur, C., Lemerise, A.J. and Parker, R. Ten attributes of health literate health care organizations. Institute of Medicine Roundtable on Health Literacy Discussion Paper. Health and Medicine Division of the National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine, 2012. Available at: <https://www.jointcommission.org/assets/1/6/10attributes.pdf>

Illawarra Shoalhaven Local Health District Health Literacy Framework: A Plan for Becoming a Health Literate Organisation 2012 - 2015. Warrawong: Illawarra Shoalhaven Local Health District, 2010. Available at: <http://www.cec.health.nsw.gov.au/quality-improvement/people-and-culture/person-centred-care/partnering-with-patients/lhd-examples>

Agency for Healthcare Research and Quality. Health Literacy Universal Precautions Toolkit, 2nd edition. Rockville, MD: Agency for Healthcare Research and Quality (US), 2015. Available at: <https://www.ahrq.gov/professionals/quality-patient-safety/quality-resources/tools/literacy-toolkit/index.html>