Health Literacy Fact Sheet **5**:
Supporting staff to meet health literacy needs

A fact sheet for quality managers

This fact sheet describes how you can support your staff, through education and training, to better understand and address health literacy. Supporting staff understanding of health literacy and how to communicate effectively with people with varying health literacy needs will help you meet some of the requirements of the National Safety and Quality Health Service (NSQHS) Standards.

Key points

- Staff should be supported to understand health literacy, the health literacy environment and how it affects a person's ability to understand information, make decisions, and act for their health

- By providing staff with health literacy training and techniques to improve communication skills, you can contribute to improving your organisation's health literacy environment.

Why is it important to support staff?

All of your staff play a role in creating a positive health literacy environment, from your clincians to your managers and your administrative staff. The information that your staff provide, and the relationships that they build with consumers contribute to consumers' understanding of their health and health care.

The way that your staff communicate affects how consumers view their role and capacity for decision-making, their options, and the degree to which they understand the implications of different actions on their life and care.

It is important for organisations to support staff by improving their awareness of how health literacy influences health care, their role in improving the health literacy environment,

the importance of communication, and useful techniques to improve their communication skills.

How to support staff to understand and address health literacy needs

Whether you choose to develop your own health literacy education session, or use an externally developed course, you should encourage all staff to access education and training on health literacy and communication. Including administrative staff, clinicians and management in education sessions that are tailored to your organisation will ensure that all staff know how health literacy can affect consumers, and the ways they can reduce the barriers to health literacy within their role.

Education and training about health literacy

Education and training on health literacy can be formal or informal. It can involve the development of internal training materials and resources, the adaptation of existing resources or accessing external training through a training provider. It can range from simple sessions on health literacy issues relevant to your organisation, to more comprehensive and structured training programs.

The North West Melbourne Primary Health Network has compiled a list of Health literacy resources for health professionals within their website. This list brings together a range of tools and resources to help staff understand health literacy and how to address it. The information within this could be used to provide staff with:

- Introductory sessions on health literacy
- Health literacy guides and toolkits
- Information and tools for working with people from different cultures.

The Centre for Culture Ethnicity and Health's Health Literacy Hub contains resources to support staff awareness and action, and information sheets on a range of health literacy topics including:

- What is health literacy
- Assumptions in the communication encounter
- Measuring health literacy
- Verbal communication
- Using the teach-back technique.

Information about the core concepts, principles and different approaches to addressing health literacy can also be found in the Australian Commission on Safety and Quality in Health Care's report on *Health Literacy: Taking action to improve safety and quality.* The information in this resource can be used and adapted for presentations, seminars or information for staff on health literacy and communication techniques.

Communication tools

Staff can use a range of communication strategies to ensure consumers understand their options and are more involved in their healthcare decisions. Clear communication can help consumers understand health information and feel more involved in their care.

The *Health Literacy Universal Precautions Toolkit*, developed by the Agency for Healthcare Research and Quality, is a comprehensive guide to improving health literacy in your organisation and includes many tools that are useful for training, educating and supporting staff. For example, Tool 4 outlines strategies for communicating effectively and recommends:

- Greeting consumers warmly
- Making appropriate eye contact throughout the consultation
- Listening carefully, and trying not to interrupt consumers
- Using plain, non-medical language
- Demonstrating exercises or actions you want the consumer to take
- Inviting consumers to ask questions and follow up if they need to.

Teach back is a method that clinicians can use to confirm that they have explained to consumers what they need to know, and ensure the message is understood. During a consultation the clinician asks the consumer to state in their own words the key points of the discussion and to repeat back concepts and what it means for them.

The *Always Use Teach Back Toolkit* describes some Teach back strategies including:

- Use plain language and ask the consumer to explain back, using their own words, what was agreed
- Use non-shaming open-ended questions
- Emphasise the responsibility to explain is clearly on you, the provider
- Repeat the process until you are confident the key messages are understood.

Support culturally sensitive communication

Culture, religion, ethnic customs and beliefs can influence how consumers understand information and make decisions about their health. It is important for staff to communicate in a culturally sensitive way, and for health services to have information available in formats that are useful for a diverse range of consumers.

Queensland Health have developed a resource about *Communicating Effectively with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander People*, which encourages staff to be aware of their communication style and the cultural practices of their consumers.

The guide includes advice on:

- Culturally sensitive language

- Personal space including physical space, and gender

- The use of silence

- Appropriate eye contact

- The concept of 'shame', and privacy

- Expectations and needs around cultural, community and family support.

The Centre for Culture Ethnicity and Health has developed a tip sheet on *Culturally Competent Communication*, with examples of good practice to support appropriate communication between staff and consumers with low English proficiency. The advice includes:

- Finding out as much as you can about the consumer

- Being clear about what you want the consumer to understand at the end of the conversation

- Writing down the main messages, and making sure you can explain them simply

- Making sure the consumer has access to a translator if necessary.

For assistance with translating and interpreting, general practitioners and pharmacists can access the free Translating and Interpreting Service (TIS) on 131 450.

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/.

Resource List

North Western Melbourne Primary Health Network. Health literacy resources for health professionals. Melbourne: North Western Melbourne Primary Health Network, 2015. Available at: http://nwmphn.org.au/services/dsp-default.cfm?loadref=123

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

Always use teachback toolkit [website]. Available at: http://teachbacktraining.org

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