

TIP SHEET



Standard 2: Partnering with Consumers

Tip Sheet 5: Preparing written information for consumers that is clear, understandable and easy to use

How to use this tip sheet

This tip sheet focuses on how you can work in partnership with consumers to ensure that the written health information that your organisation prepares meets their needs; that is clear, understandable and easy to use.

This information can be used to help you understand how to meet a number of actions across the National Safety Quality Health Service (NSQHS) Standards related to the provision of information to consumers including actions 3.19.1, 3.19.2, 4.13.1, 4.15.1, 4.15.2, 7.9.1, 7.10.1, 8.9.1, 9.7.1, 9.9.2 and 10.9.1.

Providing information to consumers is part of providing good health care

Providing information to consumers about their health and health care is critical for ensuring that they understand their care and treatment options, the decisions they can make and the action required of them.

Evidence shows that providing information in different formats, such as combining written and verbal information, is the most effective way to ensure consumers absorb the information they need and are supported to act on that information.

This tip sheet focuses on simplifying written information for consumers as a way of improving communication.



Why you need to think about the way you prepare written information for consumers

Almost 60% of Australian adults do not have the level of health literacy that is needed to find, understand, use and act on information about health and health care.

We often assume that the written health information we provide is understandable for all people. If we understand the message, then we assume it must be clear to others. However, there are many factors that influence whether a person will be able to understand the written health information they are provided with. Some of these factors relate to the person who is receiving the information and others relate to how the information is prepared and provided.

As a health service organisation you can play a role in improving people's understanding of written health information by improving the way it is prepared and provided, and by reducing the complexity of the information you provide.

Health literacy and using a universal precautions approach to making health care easy to understand

The Commission recommends that health service organisations take a universal precautions approach to health literacy by:

- simplifying communication with, and confirming comprehension for all consumers, so that the risk of miscommunication is minimised
- making the healthcare environment and system easier to navigate
- supporting the efforts of consumers to improve their health.

More information on the universal precautions approach can be found at the Agency for Healthcare Research and Quality - Health literacy universal precautions toolkit: <http://www.ahrq.gov/professionals/quality-patient-safety/quality-resources/tools/literacy-toolkit/healthlittoolkit2.pdf>



Clarifying the intent, purpose and content

When writing a document for consumers you must have a good understanding of why you are writing the document, what you want to say and the people you are writing for. This will help you decide what:

- type of document is needed
- the key messages are
- text is used to communicate the key messages.

Using plain language

One way of improving the chances that your written information will be easily understood is to use plain language. Plain language minimises misinterpretation and improves understanding. It uses common everyday words, but it does not use dumbed down or casual language.

For example, if you were to write a document using plain language you would use the following principles:

- use commonly used words where possible, rather than unfamiliar, complex (multi-syllable) or technical words (e.g. use 'about' instead of 'regarding', 'not important' instead of 'inconsequential' and 'skin' instead of 'epidermis')
- avoid abbreviations, acronyms and jargon as much as possible (e.g. 'Please telephone the Emergency Department if you have any unusual symptoms' instead of 'Please ring ED re any unusual symptoms')
- use short sentences, usually with 20 words or less
- use short paragraphs, usually with 3 sentences or less
- discuss one topic per paragraph

- include technical and legal information only where necessary, and with clear explanations
- do not explain more than the reader needs to know.

Designing your documents

The design or presentation of your documents will also influence how easily consumers can understand and use the information. Some simple design tips include:

- select fonts that are commonly used (e.g. Arial, Helvetica, Times New Roman and Garamond)
- make sure the font is large enough for easy reading
- use paragraphs and headings that are well spaced
- left justify headings and text
- do not have text that runs sideways or across images and shaded backgrounds
- avoid finishing words on the next line
- avoid writing words in capital letters (use boldface or italics to emphasise text).

Graphics and other visual images may help to communicate your message and enhance understanding. In some instances, a visual image is more effective than written information.

When designing a form or questionnaire to seek information from consumers think about the layout and type of questions you will need to use. The following things should also be considered:

- are the questions in a logical order and are the most important questions first?
- is there enough space for consumers to write their answers?
- can you make the form or questionnaire shorter?
- how will the form or questionnaire be processed?



Checking how clear, understandable and easy to use your written information is

There are several readability tests that can give you an idea of the reading level of your written material. Examples include the Fry readability graph, the Simple Measure of Gobbledygook detector and the Flesch-Kincaid Grade Level Score.

Readability tests help you determine the reading grade level of text based on word, sentence and text length. A readability test should only be used as part of your verification process because it cannot tell you if the material is written clearly, if the content is in logical order, whether the vocabulary is appropriate for the audience or if the design helps or hinders the reader.

In addition, the best way to know if your message is clear, understandable and easy to use is to 'test' your document with the people you have prepared it for. Ask some of your consumers to look at the document and get them to explain back to you what they think the key messages are, ask them which parts of the document could be clearer and if there are any questions they would have after reading the document. You could do this on a one on one basis, with small groups or more formal focus groups.

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The US Agency for Healthcare Research and Quality has developed a Patient Education Material Assessment Tool to help organisations self-assess their materials and identify strengths and weaknesses in the education materials they develop. The questions within the tool can also be used as a basis for consumer assessment of the materials.

Further information on how to test your written information with consumers can be found in Tip Sheet 6.



Further Information

Agency for Healthcare Research and Quality - Health literacy universal precautions toolkit:

<http://www.ahrq.gov/professionals/quality-patient-safety/quality-resources/tools/literacy-toolkit/healthlittoolkit2.pdf>

Agency for Healthcare Research and Quality - Patient Education Materials Assessment Tool:

<http://www.ahrq.gov/professionals/prevention-chronic-care/improve/self-mgmt/pemat/index.html>

Canadian Public Health Association - Easy does it! Plain language and clear verbal

communication training manual: http://www.cpha.ca/uploads/portals/h-l/easy_does_it_e.pdf

US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention - Simply put: A guide for creating easy-to-

understand materials: http://www.cdc.gov/healthliteracy/pdf/Simply_Put.pdf

US Federal Plain Language Guidelines: <http://www.plainlanguage.gov/howto/guidelines/bigdoc/fullbigdoc.pdf>

Free readability formulas: <http://www.readabilityformulas.com/free-readability-formula-tests.php>

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