



# HEALTH LITERACY:

## A summary for Executives & Managers

Health literacy is crucial to the safety and quality of care that your healthcare organisation delivers.

If the people who use your healthcare organisation do not understand the information and services you are providing, then they may be at higher risk of experiencing poor health outcomes.

There are many things that you can do to help your consumers better understand their health and health care.

## What is health literacy?

**We used to think that health literacy was just about how well a person could find, understand and use health information — their skills and abilities and what they know about health.**

It is actually much more than this. The way health information and services are provided can also affect what you know and what you do about your health.

The Australian Commission on Safety and Quality in Health Care (Commission) talks about two different parts that together shape how people understand health information and services:

### Individual health literacy

This is a person's skills and abilities, how well they can find, understand and act on health information, make health decisions and find and use health services.

Examples include how much the person already knows about health issues; the way their beliefs might shape their care decisions; how much they know about risks; how confident they are at asking questions; and how skilled they are at balancing options.

### The health literacy environment

This includes the systems, processes, people, information and practices that make up the health and health care industries and sector.

Examples include the way information about options about health and health services are provided; information about health and health care in the media and the way health systems and processes are set up.

#### INDIVIDUAL HEALTH LITERACY

Consumers' skills, abilities, knowledge and experience

Understanding and being able to act on information about health and health care

#### HEALTH LITERACY ENVIRONMENT

How easy or hard information or services are to understand

## Why is health literacy important to you?

**Health literacy is important because if people cannot find, understand and use health-related information and services, it is hard for them to make good decisions about their health.**

People with low health literacy find it hard to know which foods to eat, how much they should exercise, which preventive health services they need, how to follow medication instructions, when to contact a doctor, how to decide between treatment options and how to maintain a care plan.

In turn, this influences their health and wellbeing.

Low levels of health literacy affect the safety and quality of health care. People with low health literacy are more likely to be hospitalised, to need to go to an emergency department and to have poorer health outcomes.

Low health literacy can also significantly affect the human and financial resources of healthcare organisations. Some studies suggest it may be associated with extra costs of 3–5% to the health system.

Services that are not used properly are not efficient and effective.

### **The benefits of improving your health literacy environment**

Improving your health literacy environment should:

- Make it easier for people to find, understand and use your health-related information and services
- Improve the experience of consumers by ensuring your health service understands and addresses people's healthcare needs and preferences
- Ensure that the information your organisation provides is effective and fit for purpose
- Improve safety and quality by encouraging people to be involved in decision-making

You should assume that many people do not understand your information and systems, and you should take efforts to make your health literacy environment easy to understand.

## How can I improve health literacy?

**As a healthcare executive or manager you have control over your healthcare environment. This includes things like:**

- Organisational policies and the strategic direction of the organisation including the organisation's vision and mission statement, consumer engagement policies, and training and development policies
- Health-related information including general information, forms, advice and healthcare directions regarding medications, therapies, treatment plans, referrals, preventive therapy, diets or exercise
- Organisational information including directories, website information, signs and recorded information
- Systems or processes people need to follow to make appointments, obtain results, follow treatment plans, pay for care, claim from insurance or attend referrals
- People and teams working within your environment, including receptionists, administrators, doctors, nurses, managers, executives and other staff

You have the capacity to review these aspects of your healthcare organisation to help identify whether improvements can be made so that your information, systems and services are easier for consumers to understand and use.

### How you can improve your health literacy environment

**Start by identifying where people may have difficulties understanding your information or services. You could get different people to walk through your services and use an audit tool to identify any potential problems**

*(see Links to further information for examples of tools).*

When planning improvements to your health literacy environment, think about the structures that need to be in place to support and enact change in this area.

Ten key attributes have been identified as forming part of a good health literacy environment *(see Table 1)*.

Table 1: Attributes of a healthcare organisation that addresses health literacy

Attribute	Potential actions
<b>1. Leadership that makes health literacy integral to the mission, structure and operations of the organisation</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Assign responsibility to an individual or group for actions to improve the health literacy environment.</li> <li>• Make clear and effective communication a priority across all levels of the organisation and all communication channels</li> </ul>
<b>2. Health literacy is integrated into planning, evaluation measures, patient safety, and quality improvement</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Audit the health literacy environment (either in the annual audit program or by running a standalone audit)</li> <li>• Ensure that safety and quality and other improvement initiatives reflect health literacy principles and are evaluated to ensure they improve the health literacy environment</li> <li>• Align a focus on health literacy with other organisational priorities such as reducing health disparities and providing patient-centred care</li> </ul>
<b>3. The workforce is prepared to be health literate and monitors progress</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Incorporate health literacy into orientation sessions and other types of training for the workforce</li> <li>• Provide training which highlights the importance of health literacy and strategies to reduce barriers to administrative and front of house staff such as receptionists</li> </ul>
<b>4. Populations served by the organisation are included in the design, implementation, and evaluation of health information and services</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Involve consumers in governance processes</li> <li>• Collaborate with members of the target community in the design and testing of interventions including design of facilities, redesign projects and evaluation</li> </ul>
<b>5. The needs of populations with a range of health literacy skills are met while avoiding stigmatisation</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Adopt an approach to health literacy that does not make assumptions about levels of individual health literacy (the universal precautions approach)</li> <li>• Provide alternatives to written information where possible, and create an environment that does not impose high literacy demands (such as walls and bulletin boards that only display key information for consumers)</li> </ul>

Table 1 continued:

Attribute	Potential actions
<b>6. Health literacy strategies are used in interpersonal communication, and confirm understanding at all points of contact</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Foster a culture that emphasises verification of understanding of every communication (both clinical and non-clinical)</li> <li>Plan for and provide language assistance where needed, and treat communication failures as patient safety issues</li> </ul>
<b>7. Easy access to health information and services and navigation assistance is provided</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Design healthcare organisations with features that help people find their way</li> <li>Use easily understood language and symbols on signage</li> <li>Ensure that information that is available about local resources and services can be understood by consumers with low levels of literacy</li> </ul>
<b>8. Print, audiovisual and social media content are designed and delivered so that they are easy to understand and act on</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Stock high-quality educational materials that are appropriate for consumers with low health literacy</li> <li>Choose materials that reflect health literacy principles</li> <li>Test consumer information publications as part of the development process with the target audience through surveys, focus groups or other engagement strategies</li> </ul>
<b>9. Health literacy is addressed in high-risk situations, including care transitions and information about medicines</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Identify high-risk situations and establish plans to ensure safe communication in areas such as informed consent, referrals, end of life care or use of medicines</li> </ul>
<b>10. Health plan coverage and what individuals will have to pay for services is clearly communicated</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Provide easy-to-understand descriptions of health insurance policies and communicate the out-of-pocket costs for health care services before they are delivered</li> </ul>

SOURCE: INSTITUTE OF MEDICINE 2012

## What is the Commission doing?

**The Commission is working to build national action on health literacy. It is also working to support healthcare organisations to improve their health literacy environment.**

Because so many different things can influence a person's health literacy, many people and organisations need to work together in different ways to address health literacy.

A national coordinated approach to health literacy needs to use a range of strategies to:

- **Embed health literacy into systems**
- **Ensure effective communication**
- **Integrate health literacy into education**

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### Links to further information and resources

**Australian Commission on Safety and Quality in Health Care: Health literacy: Taking action for safety and quality**

<http://www.safetyandquality.gov.au/wp-content/uploads/2014/08/Health-Literacy-Taking-action-to-improve-safety-and-quality.pdf>

**Agency for Healthcare Research and Quality: Health Literacy Universal Precautions Toolkit**

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

**Enliven: Organisational Health Literacy Self-assessment Resource**

<http://www.enliven.org.au/Documents/Library/Resources/Health%20lit%20resources/Enliven%20Health%20Literacy%20Audit%20Resource.pdf>

**NSW Clinical Excellence Commission: Health Literacy Guide**

<http://www.cec.health.nsw.gov.au/hlg>

**Rudd and Anderson: The Health Literacy Environment of Hospitals and Health Centers**

<http://www.hsph.harvard.edu/healthliteracy/files/2012/09/healthliteracyenvironment.pdf>



**Australian Commission on Safety  
and Quality in Health Care**

Level 5, 255 Elizabeth Street, Sydney NSW 2000  
GPO Box 5480, Sydney NSW 2001

**Phone:** (02) 9126 3600 (international +61 2 9126 3600)

**Fax:** (02) 9126 3613 (international +61 2 9126 3613)

**Email:** [mail@safetyandquality.gov.au](mailto:mail@safetyandquality.gov.au)

[www.safetyandquality.gov.au](http://www.safetyandquality.gov.au)