
The National Society of Dental Practitioners and the Dentist's Advantage Insurance Program for Dentists

RISK MANAGEMENT ARTICLE

Health Literacy: A Valuable Component for Dental Practice and Business

On Monday morning, your upbeat mood turns sour when you hear about an impending lawsuit. You remember the patient, whom you saw for a dental implant procedure. The patient subsequently developed an infection at the site, which cleared only after extensive antibiotic treatment. Now the patient is saying he was never told to maintain good oral hygiene after the surgery.

The dental hygienist remembers explaining the cleaning process, giving the patient a handout, and hearing the patient say “no” when she asked, “Do you have any questions?” What happened in this situation?

The answer is that like many healthcare providers, the dental hygienist probably overestimated the patient's health literacy. According to a 2003 report from the Department of Health and Human Services (the most recent available data), only 12 percent of U.S. adults have “proficient” health literacy, meaning they can understand and use health information effectively, and more than a third have only a basic or below basic level. That translates into millions of people in the U.S. who don't understand vital health information, such as maintaining oral health to prevent periodontal disease.

Such lack of knowledge can be deadly. People with low health literacy are often less likely to seek preventive care, comply with medical instructions, and engage in self-care actions to control chronic diseases, so it's not surprising that a 2011 report from the Agency for Healthcare Research and Quality linked low health literacy to poorer health status and a higher risk of death.

Poor health literacy can also result in communication failures that lead to adverse events and end up with you giving testimony in a courtroom, where you will be held to standards of care that include effective communication.

Changing this paradigm requires understanding the issue of health literacy and having resources available for you and your staff so everyone can help ensure comprehension.

The value of health literacy

Patients must understand instructions so they can manage their own care and improve outcomes, which makes health literacy an important component of comprehensive dental care. The American Dental Association (ADA) has weighed in on the topic, saying that limited health literacy is “a potential barrier to effective prevention, diagnosis, and treatment of oral disease” and that effective communication is an essential skill for dentists. The ADA has also specified oral health literacy as important in maintaining overall public health.

Three 2010 national initiatives also support health literacy—The Affordable Care Act, the National Action Plan to Improve Health Literacy from the Department of Health and Human Services, and the Plain Writing Act. In addition, The Joint Commission's standards on patient-centered communication, which include health literacy, went into effect July 1, 2012. Although the Joint Commission doesn't accredit dental offices, such initiatives serve to strengthen general expectations that health literacy should be addressed in oral and written communications.

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As a practicing dentist—and perhaps as the business owner of your practice—you want to provide excellent outcomes and keep yourself out of court. To do that, it's important you and your employees have what they need to effectively do their jobs, which includes communicating effectively with patients.

Enhancing patient understanding

Several strategies can help you and your employees address health literacy with patients. See *Strategies for addressing health literacy* for a list.

In addition, choose appropriate patient materials, including consent for treatment forms and education tools. The average American reads at the 7th or 8th grade level, but experts recommend materials are written at a 5th grade or lower because so many people read at this level. Materials at lower reading levels avoid a large amount of text and use words of few syllables. They use “you” instead of “the patient” and sentences are short.

Have materials available in different languages and formats (e.g., audio files, video, pictograms) to meet patients' needs, such as those with limited English proficiency. Use text fonts large enough so older patients can read materials easily. Some states require dentists to provide a translator for patients with limited proficiency in English; the dentist pays the translator's fee.

Keep in mind that a patient's anxiety about a dental procedure, for instance fear of pain, can impede comprehension. You may need to repeat information several times before the patient absorbs and understands key points.

Finally, consider the cultural background of your clients. Some may come from cultures with lower standards of oral health, and others may not be comfortable interacting with people perceived as authorities. It's important to build trust, and you may want to consider hiring employees who reflect the cultural background of your patient population or connecting with volunteers in the community who can assist in building trust.

Enhancing staff understanding

Don't assume your staff members have a high level of health literacy skills simply because they work in an environment where healthcare is delivered. Even health professionals may have insufficient health literacy in areas outside their expertise. And, helping administrative assistants, coordinators, dental hygienists, and other employees to improve their health literacy skills will increase their ability to communicate with each other and patients and to document and code procedures correctly. This establishes an environment where errors are less likely, reducing chances of litigation, and has an additional benefit of reducing lost charges.

The goal is to create an organization that values health literacy for both patients and staff. This may include creating an office policy that asserts the importance of health literacy and creates processes for communicating effectively.

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Call to action

In the United States, limited literacy skills are a stronger predictor of a person's health status than age, income, employment status, education level, and racial or ethnic group. By helping ensuring patients understand information, you can help them achieve better oral health, which contributes to overall health as well.

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Resources

American Dental Association. Breaking Down Barriers to Oral Health for All Americans: The Role of Workforce. A Statement from the American Dental Association. 2011.
American Dental Association Council on Access, Prevention and Interprofessional Relations. Health Literacy in Dentistry Action Plan 2010-2015. 2009.
Brach C, Dreyer B, Schyve P, et al. Attributes of a Health Literate Organization. 2012. Institute of Medicine: Washington, DC.
www.iom.edu/Activities/PublicHealth/~media/Files/Activity%20Files/PublicHealth/HealthLiteracy/10attributes.pdf.
Health Literacy Interventions and Outcomes: An Update of the Literacy and Health Outcomes Systematic Review of the Literature. 2011.
<http://www.ahrq.gov/clinic/tp/lituptp.htm>
The Joint Commission. Advancing Effective Communication, Cultural Competence, and Patient and Family-Centered Care: A Roadmap for Hospitals. http://www.jointcommission.org/Advancing_Effective_Communication
North Carolina Program on Health Literacy. Health Literacy Universal Precautions Toolkit. <http://nchealthliteracy.org/toolkit>

Strategies for addressing health literacy

Don't assume you know a patient's health literacy level. Use these strategies to achieve effective communication:

- Ask the patient how he or she prefers to receive information (by reading, hearing, or seeing).
- Avoid medical jargon, speak slowly and in simple terminology, and limit information to two or three key points.
- Instead of asking "Do you have any questions?" ask, "What questions do you have?"
- Repeat key points.
- Use pictures to explain concepts.

Remember to document what you do in the medical record. Include specifics such as communication methods used and the patient's responses, instead of a generic phrase such as "education given." For instance, in the case of oral hygiene to prevent periodontal disease, you would want to include the name of the handout you gave and the use of return demonstration to verify the patient's ability to use dental floss correctly.

A "universal" resource

Although an ADA report notes that the more educated a population group the more likely its members have a high degree of oral health literacy, no one can tell a patient's health literacy by looking at him or her. For instance, those with limited health literacy may have completed high school or college and hold healthcare jobs.

However, in this busy world of healthcare, there is little time to conduct a formal assessment. That's why the North Carolina Program on Health Literacy (NCPHL) says that just as healthcare providers use universal precautions to prevent the spread of blood-borne diseases for all patients, they need to use health literacy universal precautions for all patients. The ADA also advocates a universal standards approach in its "Health Literacy in Dentistry Action Plan 2010-2015."

NCPHL developed the "Health Literacy Universal Precautions Toolkit," available as a free download at <http://www.nchealthliteracy.org/toolkit>. The toolkit, commissioned by the Agency for Healthcare Research and Quality, includes steps that healthcare providers can easily implement in their practice.

NCPHL is also a good resource for information you can give your staff about the "teach-back" method. If asked, "Do you understand?" after receiving health information, most patients will say yes rather than admit their lack of knowledge. "Teach-back" is a powerful method that ensures a patient truly comprehends what has been said. In this method, healthcare providers ask the patient to "teach" them the information. For example, you might say to patient who will be using a new oral appliance, "I want to be sure that I explained this correctly. Can you show me how you would put this in your mouth?"

Teach-back can help healthcare providers ensure that patients understand the information they receive, so they are more likely to adhere to instructions, thus reducing the likelihood of complications and a possible lawsuit.

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