Communicating effectively by delivering a literacy friendly health service

National Patient Safety Office conference
17 October 2018
Outline

What is health literacy and numeracy and why is it important?

Delivering a literacy friendly service

Practical ways to improve health communication
Literacy is ...

- Listening and speaking
- Writing
- Technology
- Reading
- Numeracy
- Self confidence and self esteem

A beginner reader is not a beginner thinker.
What is health literacy and numeracy?

Health literacy and numeracy has two elements:

Health services communicate clearly and take account of possible health literacy and numeracy needs.

People understand health information correctly and can make an informed decision.

It is about mutual understanding
What is Health Literacy?

When we deal with health services we often have to:

- Understand **graphs** or other visual information (visual literacy)
- Get and apply **relevant information** (information literacy)
- Use a **computer** (digital literacy)
- Work out **numbers** (numeracy)
- Communicate effectively with healthcare providers (Oral literacy)
Health numeracy is the **ability to understand and use quantitative health information**, including:

- basic calculations, and
- information in documents and non-text formats such as graphs.
Health numeracy

Research shows that many people do not have adequate numeracy skills to look after their health.

Cancer Research UK recently found that 46% of people got the answer wrong when asked whether a risk of 1 in 100, 1 in 10, or 1 in 1000 resulted in more chance of their getting a disease (Smith et al., 2014). They also found that those with poor numeracy skills were less likely to take a bowel cancer screening test.

### Everyday Examples

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Prose literacy</th>
<th>Document literacy</th>
<th>Numeracy</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Patient has an appointment for blood tests and is instructed in writing to fast the night before the test.</td>
<td>Patient is given a prescription for a new medication that needs to be taken at a certain dosage twice a day.</td>
<td>Patient is told to buy a glucose meter and use it 30 minutes before each meal and before going to bed. If the number is above a certain value they need to take medication.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Why is health literacy and numeracy important?
It is important because ...

- People with limited literacy and numeracy skills report poorer overall health.
- They are less likely to make use of screening.
- They present in later stages of disease.
- They are more likely to be hospitalised.
- They have lower adherence to medical regimens.
- They have poorer understanding of treatment.

Reference: Rima Rudd, NALA Health and Literacy Conference, 2002
It is important because ...

One in five Irish people are not fully confident that they understand the information they receive from their healthcare professional (HCP).

43% of people would only sometimes ask their HCP to clarify the information if they did not understand something they had said.

17% of people have taken the wrong dose of medication at least once.

66% of people have difficulty understanding signs and directions in Irish hospitals.

Irish Health Literacy Research, 2007 and 2015
Recent research found...

39% of Irish people calling for less medical jargon from their healthcare professionals.

People aged 15 - 34 years were least likely to ask a doctor, nurse or pharmacist to explain things they don't understand.

Embarrassment was ranked as the main reason for not seeking more information from a healthcare professional (24%).

45% couldn't define the term prognosis.
40% of Irish people have limited health literacy.

This means that 4 out of 10 people who use health services find it difficult to understand and act on health information.

1 in every 4 people has a difficulty with numbers.
Adult Skills Survey 2013

1 in 6 people have a literacy difficulty in Ireland

18% of Irish adults are at or below level 1 of literacy – 521,550 people

25% of Irish adults are at or below level 1 of numeracy – 754,000 people

1 in 4 people have a problem with numeracy
10.3% had inadequate health literacy
29.7% had problematic health literacy
Limited health literacy rate 40% (2012)
Government Commitment

Healthy Ireland - new national framework for action to improve the health and wellbeing of our country (2013 – 2025) - contains the first ever Government commitment to health literacy:

“Address and prioritise health literacy in developing future policy, educational and information interventions”

HSE Healthy Ireland Implementation Plan 2015-17

Health Literacy Action 45 – Promote and provide national tools for training, resource development, and health literacy audits in services to raise standards of health literacy among patients, service users, and carers.
Delivering a health literacy friendly service
Mapping the public journey

**Speaking**
- Reception
- One-to-one conversation (face to face or by phone)

**Written information**
- Documents, leaflets, forms
- Website
- Letters and Email

NA LA
National Adult Literacy Agency
Aisineacht Nàisiúnta Litearthachta do Aoscaigh
Becoming literacy friendly

A health literacy friendly service takes account of the literacy and numeracy needs of its customers.

- Environment
- Staff awareness
- Verbal communication
- Printed material

Benefits
- Clearer understanding
- More effective communication
- Better and equal access
- Greater participation
- Fulfil national standards
- Better impact
Experience of dealing with health services
Becoming health literacy friendly

A health literacy friendly service has policies, procedures and practices that ensure basic skills are accounted for in everything that it does.

NALA supports organisations to follow a five-step process to become more health literacy friendly.

A literacy audit is a snapshot of a service and how it addresses literacy issues in policies and procedures, communications and staff training and development. It looks at:

- What you already do to support people who have literacy and numeracy difficulties; and
- What you could do better to support them.
# Literacy friendly quality standards

## Policies and procedures

1. We have a literacy friendly policy.
2. We have specific ways to help people find and use important information and instructions.
3. We support our staff to improve their literacy, numeracy and digital skills.

## Communications

4. Our staff use **plain English** when **speaking** with people.
5. We use **plain English** in our **written information**.
6. We **check** that people **understand** what we have told them.
7. The **layout** of our office/reception/service is clear.

## Staff awareness and responding sensitively

8. Our staff are **aware** of literacy friendly work practices.
9. Our staff **respond sensitively** to the literacy and numeracy needs of people.

## Evaluating and improving

10. We regularly **evaluate** and continually **improve** our literacy friendly service.
The Crystal Clear Mark 2015-18

New national programme offering pharmacies and general practices the opportunity to gain a unique quality mark. This Crystal Clear Mark recognises pharmacies and general practices that deliver a health literacy friendly service to their patients.

You must show that you comply with nine quality standards by completing an online audit tool. The standards and questions look at policies and procedures; communications, staff training and awareness and evaluating and improving.

It was developed by The Irish Pharmacy Union (IPU), MSD and NALA.

Online Audit Tool  www.nala.ie/crystalclear
Developing quality standards for a literacy friendly hospital

Building on the standards in the Crystal Clear programme and other audits, NALA has identified 18 standards for hospital settings:

- **Communications** - 8 standards
- **Staff awareness and responding sensitively** – 3 standards
- **Policies and procedures** – 4 standards
- **Evaluating and improving** – 3 standards
The Crystal Clear Mark 2015-16

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**Online Audit Tool**  [www.nala.ie/crystalclear](http://www.nala.ie/crystalclear)
Video: Health literacy for people working in healthcare
Over to you: your work, your experience

From your observation, what are the main literacy and numeracy challenges that you experience in your work?

What you do now that works well to support patients with literacy and or numeracy challenges?

What other ideas do you have on this?
Practical ways to improve health communication
What Can You Do?

The Do’s

• Be understanding, sensitive and non-judgemental
• Remind the person that what they say is in confidence
• Where possible make time to give support
• Use **plain English** – when speaking and writing
• Give the person plenty of opportunity to ask questions – use the “talk back” method

The Don’ts

• Don’t use jargon
• Don’t make assumptions
• Don’t suggest someone needs to ‘learn to read’
• Don’t lose patience or don’t start filling in a form for the customer without their permission
Tips for health practitioners...

Communicate using plain English and follow design standards. See www.simplyput.ie for advice.

Give clear, easy to follow verbal information. Explain any medical terminology.

The layout and signage is clear and easy to follow. There is a map and floor plan at the main door. There are clear direction signs.

Check that people understand what you have said. Ask people to repeat back to you:
1. What is their main problem?
2. What do they need to do?
3. Why it is important they need to do this?
(Taken from Ask Me 3 Campaign: www.npsf.org/askme3)

All staff are aware of literacy and numeracy issues and how to respond appropriately and sensitively. For example, staff offer help with reading information and or filling in a form.
Knowing your audience

- Children and youth
- Culture and language
- Emotions and cognition
- Hearing loss
- Literacy
- Older adults
- Vision problems

Reference: Health Literacy from A to Z by Helen Osborne
Look out for possible signs of a literacy need

• Asking for information that is already displayed in writing
• Giving excuses to avoid reading or writing in front of you
• Reluctance to fill in forms or stopping after name and address
• Returning a form incomplete or incorrectly filled out
• Uneasy body language
Assessing Health Literacy

Sometimes it is important that you know how well someone can read, understand and act on information. For example, when giving instructions for medication. How can you do this appropriately and sensitively?

Using simple questions can help to identify if someone has a health literacy need:

- How confident are you in filling out medical forms?
- How comfortable are you with reading those medical instructions?
## Watching your language

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Instead of</th>
<th>Consider</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Administer</td>
<td>Give</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Benign</td>
<td>Harmless</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dosage</td>
<td>How to take</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hypertension</td>
<td>High blood pressure</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Malignant</td>
<td>Harmful</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Using plain English

Language, punctuation and grammar

Structure

Page design

NALA checklist for documents and forms.

NALA website on Plain English www.simplyput.ie
Using plain English

1. Think of whom you are writing to and why.
2. Be personal and direct.
3. Keep it simple and define any essential jargon and abbreviations.
4. Use a clear font such as Arial or Verdana and use 12 point.
5. Keep sentences to an average of 15 to 20 words.
6. Use signposts – for example, table of contents, headings and bulleted lists

NALA website on Plain English www.simplyput.ie
Every woman aged between 25 and 60 years should have regular smear tests. These will help you and your doctor or nurse make sure the neck of your womb (cervix) is healthy.

CervicalCheck offers free smear tests:
- every 3 years to women aged 25 to 44, and
- every 5 years to women aged 45 to 60.

You will receive a CervicalCheck letter inviting you for a smear test.

FREE
You do not need to pay for the test.

A smear test takes a sample of cells from the neck of the womb.

You will receive the results of your smear test in a letter within four weeks.

The smear test is very simple and takes less than 5 minutes. It may be slightly uncomfortable, but it should not be painful.

If you have any questions about your results, you can talk to your doctor or nurse.
Writing and design tips to make your documents easy to read

Get started
- What is plain English?
- Writing tips
- Document design tips
- Checking documents
- Words and phrases to avoid

News and events
EBS BUILDING SOCIETY AND NALA LAUNCH A-Z POCKET GUIDE ...

Be more effective - use plain English

Is it possible that you are losing customers because of complicated literature? Plain English can help because clearer information is more likely to save time and money.

Read more

Plain English editing
- What is this and how do I get a quote?

Plain English training
- Find out more about our writing courses

Plain English Mark
- Do your documents meet international standards?
Example: Before

The hospital patient has the right to information relevant to his situation that must allow the patient the fullest insight into all aspects of his situation, medical or otherwise, and, on an informed basis, enable him to make his own decisions or to participate in decisions which have implications for his or her wellbeing. (54)
Example: After

You have the right to information about your condition that helps you fully understand it and make informed choices about your treatment.
Plain Numbers

Plain numbers is about presenting numerical information so we readily understand it.

Top tips

• Use tables over graphs or charts

• Present numbers in context – for example: A baby at 15 weeks is 4 inches long and weighs in at about 21/2 ounces – about the size of an apple

• Write numbers one to nine in words and use digits for 10 upwards

• Leave a full space between a digit and the symbol if the symbol is a letter. For example, 25 m, 400 g.
Understanding medicine labels

The challenge is that not everybody understands what plain language looks like.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Take two tablets twice per day</th>
<th>Take two tablets at breakfast and two at bedtime</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>79% understood</td>
<td>97% understood</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Before

100 CLONAMOX 125MG/5ML PDRFOR ORAL SUSP (AMOXICILLIN PDR/SUSP 125MG/5ML)

TWO 2.5 ML SPOONS TWICE A DAY.
SHAKE WELL BEFORE USE; STORE IN A COOL PLACE; DO NOT USE AFTER <DATE>; SPACE THE DOES EVENLY THROUGHOUT THE DAY.
KEEP TAKING THIS MEDICINE UNTIL THE COURSE IS FINISHED, UNLESS YOU ARE TOLD TO STOP.

After

100 Clonamox 125 mg / 5 ml (Amoxicillin Penicillin anti-biotic)

Take one 5 ml spoon in the morning and one in the evening.

Shake well before use; Store in a cool place;
Do not use after <date>;
Space the does evenly throughout the day.
Keep taking this medicine until the course is finished, unless you are told to stop.

In the US Northwestern University simplified the text and icons used in nine prescription-medication warning labels. They then tested the standard warnings against the plain English warnings with no icons and with the new icons.

Almost 92% of patients correctly interpreted the plain English warnings with new icons (and with no icons). Only 79% correctly interpreted the standard warnings.
# Medicine labels: Do and Don’t

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Do</th>
<th>Don’t</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Use lower case letters</td>
<td>Use capitals</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Use a readable typeface, sans serif fonts like Arial or Tahoma are best</td>
<td>Use serif font such as <em>Times New Roman</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Use minimum of size 11 font, ideally size 12</td>
<td>Use 10 point or lower</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Use <strong>bigger</strong> or bold for emphasis</td>
<td>Use underline or italicise</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Be specific</td>
<td>Be vague</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Use active voice – Take 2 tablets</td>
<td>Use passive voice – One tablet twice a day</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Use numerals instead of words</td>
<td>Use words for numbers – 2 is better than TWO</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Use everyday words</td>
<td>Use medical jargon or abbreviations</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Align text to the left</td>
<td>Centre the text</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Add the purpose of the medication</td>
<td>Leave off the purpose of the medication</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Plain Speaking

Spoken communication is two-way, so at any point you can be the sender or the receiver.

Check for understanding
Use talk back – invite people to confirm they understand the key points by repeating them back to you.

It is about:
• What you say;
• How you say it; and
• Body language.
Confirming understanding: using teach back

The teach-back technique is a way to confirm that people understand what you have said.

Steps:
• After you explain a plan or concept ask the person to tell you the plan in their own words.
• Sometimes all it takes is the question: ‘What are you going to do when you get home?’

Watch video at [http://bit.ly/1bsLhX2](http://bit.ly/1bsLhX2)
Benefits of using Teach back

• Patients, who have a clear understanding at discharge, are 30% less likely to be readmitted or visit the emergency department than patients who lack this information, according to a study funded by the Agency for Healthcare Research and Quality (AHRQ) and published in the Annals of Internal Medicine.

• Becoming more popular based on support of research and usage in NHS in Scotland, in the US
Ask me 3: Patient awareness campaign

Good communication by your doctor means that you will know and understand:

1. What is my main problem
2. What do I need to do
3. Why is it important for me to do this

Adapted from Ask Me 3 patient awareness campaign
Tips for Health Literacy

Know your audience

- Having a sense of who is your audience helps with how you approach and engage with them. Look out for literacy needs.

If you ask just one question ...

- "How comfortable are you in filling out this form?"

Consider your use of language

- What does “your lab tests are unremarkable” mean?
Tips for Health Numeracy

- Assume patients lack knowledge of quantitative concepts
- Focus on just one idea at a time
- Offer support for ideas
- Use numbers only when they are really needed
- Find out which measurement system your patient uses
Well Now! is a ‘literacy friendly’ course on health and wellbeing for adults. The programme aims to facilitate adults to explore health and wellbeing topics and to increase awareness, knowledge, understanding and skills to support healthy choices.

NALA published the Well Now! guide in May 2017. This guide is intended for adult literacy and community education services who wish to provide literacy friendly courses on health and wellbeing for adults.

www.nala.ie/wellnow
One Small Change

Is there one small change you could make in your work?

What could your setting do to become more literacy friendly?
Conclusion

Health literacy is an essential skill for life that we develop and maintain throughout our lives.

It is not an individual problem – range of responses required, from personal to practice to policy.

Becoming health literacy aware means better health services.

Ask that question.
Further information

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Tel: (01) 412 7900
Email: hryan@nala.ie
Website: www.nala.ie

Crystal Clear Audit Tool: www.nala.ie/crystalclear
Plain English: www.simplyput.ie
Family: www.helpmykidlearn.ie

http://facebook.com/nalaireland
http://twitter.com/nalaireland
http://www.youtube.com/user/nationaladultliterac
Sources of help

1. Local Adult Literacy Service
   Free group or one-to-one tuition. 4 to 6 hours per week. Delivered by trained tutors. Can work towards a certificate.

2. Interactive learning website – [www.writeon.ie](http://www.writeon.ie) – offering FETAC Level 2 and 3 awards. Can also work with a tutor over the telephone – ring NALA freephone on 1 800 20 20 65.

3. Help my kid learn website for parents
Health Literacy Tools and Resources

Other ways to support literacy

• Support people you meet who could benefit from literacy tuition

• Strengthen the links between your office and the local ETB adult literacy service

• Promote literacy awareness in your own workplace and community

• Use plain English – see guide at bit.ly/1ehZ1ns

• Read with your child - www.helpmykidlearn.ie

• Volunteer as a literacy tutor

• Join NALA