

Challenges with understanding medication labels in Singapore



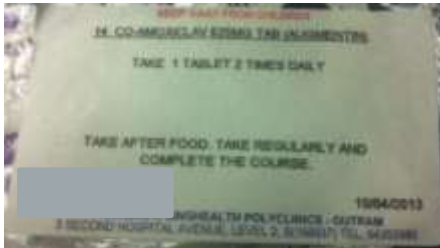
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Background

With an ageing population, and the increasing number of older adults with one or more chronic diseases, many Singaporeans must learn to not just manage their conditions but must also manage multiple long-term medications.

Medication labels hold important information for patients such as the dose and when to take the medication, as well as information on possible side effects.

The objective of this study was to understand some of the challenges patients in Singapore faced when reading their medication labels.



Methodology

Sampling method:

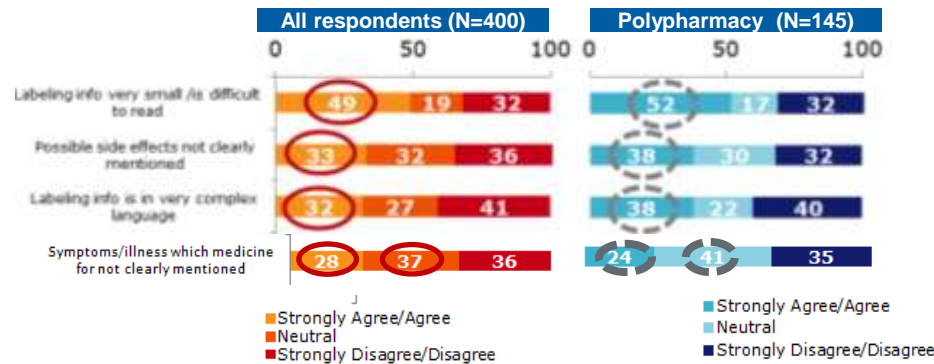
- Convenient sample of 400 individuals to capture respondents who have some experience in handling medication
- 145 of 400 respondents had polypharmacy (>5 medicines)

Inclusion criteria;

- All had at least 2 chronic conditions (i.e. hypertension, high cholesterol, diabetes, asthma/COPD, heart disease, arthritis, thyroid problems), and/or cancer
- Age range: 35-70 years old

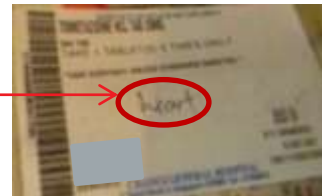
- A face-to-face survey comprising of 15 questions was administered by 25 trained staff

Results



"the word they put very difficult to see" - Man, 80 years old with polypharmacy

As a solution: additional basic information is written by the patients to indicate what the drug is for



- Trends were similar across all respondents and those with polypharmacy.
- There is a general lack of understanding of prescription label information.
- The small font size used in prescription labels is a key challenge.
- Patients also feel that clear information about what the medicine is treating along with side effects/warnings of usage is missing.

Discussion & Recommendations

A two-prong approach which reaches out to providers and patients can improve medication label understanding.

Strategies for Providers

There is an opportunity to establish guidelines and recommendations to increase the font size and what information to include on medication labels.

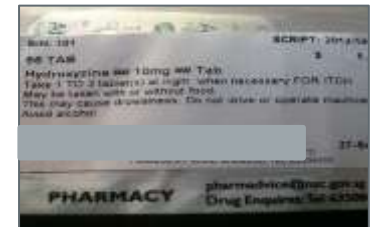
The use of pictograms and visual aids may reduce the complexity of the language used on labels and increase patient understanding.

The principles of Plain Language and patient participatory development approaches can also be applied to improve the health literacy of medication labels.

Strategies for Patients

Educational efforts which teach patients how to read medication labels can help patients understand the information provided on the label.

Patients can also be taught to understand simple warnings and messages on side effects which are on the labels to reduce negative interactions.



This study was conducted for the Surveillance Research and Patient Education Workgroup of the National Medication Safety Taskforce in Singapore (2012).