

Putting health literacy into practice through a dietetic internship program

Tracy Hutchings, MSc(T), RD, Patient Education Specialist & Helen Toews, MSc, RD, Dietetic Internship Coordinator
Hamilton Health Sciences, Hamilton General Hospital, 237 Barton Street East, Hamilton, Ontario, Canada, L8L 2X2

Introduction

Dietitians have strong scientific backgrounds in foods and nutrition. In order to help people make wise food choices to improve their health, dietitians must also be skilled in health literacy (Boehl, 2007; Clayton, 2010). As a strategy to improve the health literacy skills of health professionals in Canada, the Report of the Expert Panel on Health Literacy (Rootman and Gordon-El-Bihbety, 2008) recommends making health literacy a mandatory component of service provider curricula, professional continuing education and professional registration and certification. Health literacy training for health care professionals is also included in the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, National Action Plan to Improve Health Literacy (2010).

Program description

For professional registration, dietitians must complete a supervised practical experience from an accredited dietetic internship program (Dietitians of Canada, 2010) following a Bachelor's degree. The Dietetic Internship Program at Hamilton Health Sciences* accepts 6 applicants annually.

This program is unique from other dietetic internship programs in Canada as the curriculum includes two educational experiences designed to improve the health literacy skills of its dietetic interns; a health literacy workshop and completion of a nutrition patient education project.

The Dietetic Internship Coordinator collaborates with one of the hospital Patient Education Specialists to coordinate and deliver these learning experiences.

Objectives of the workshop and nutrition patient education project:

- Define health literacy and its related implications to practice.
- Evaluate the health literacy needs of individual patients and families and the health literacy barriers that may exist in practice.
- Learn and apply practical strategies to improve health literacy.
- Identify and follow Hamilton Health Sciences' process for developing patient education materials with an inter-disciplinary team including patients and families, as outlined in the resource, Writing Health Information for Patients and Families (Wizowski, Harper and Hutchings, 2008).



I really enjoyed learning the patient education material development process. I have a greater understanding and appreciation of the process and its value. The experience has allowed me to enhance my ability to convey nutrition education messages clearly and concisely. I had great support from all advisors in completing this project and I believe I have better developed my skills in professional communication and teamwork throughout the project.

*Hamilton Health Sciences comprises 6 hospitals and a cancer centre.

Outcomes/impact

Effectiveness of the health literacy components of the program are measured in terms of competency assessment, nutrition patient education project completion and student evaluation. Upon completion of the program, the dietetic intern evaluations consistently rate the health literacy components of the program as beneficial; they learn about health literacy and are able to apply health literacy strategies such as, clear verbal communication, plain language and clear design. The advisory dietitian to the nutrition patient education project also benefits as the created patient education resource supports their teaching, is evidenced-based and easy for patients and families to read, understand and use.

Implications for policy, delivery or practice

Integrating health literacy into the curriculum of the Dietetic Internship Program at Hamilton Health Sciences contributes to the implementation of the Report of the Expert Panel on Health Literacy (Rootman and Gordon-El-Bihbety, 2008) specifically, "to make health literacy a mandatory component of service provider curricula, professional continuing education and professional registration and certification." The success of this unique program provides a best practice model for dietetic internship programs across Canada.

References

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