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The Communication Toolkit

The Communication Toolkit (the Toolkit) contains information and materials to help employers, health care purchasers, and other organizations communicate effectively with employees and members about the meaning and importance of getting evidence-based, high quality health care.

Toolkit goals:

- (1) **Increase the health literacy of consumers** around the issues of health care quality, evidence-based health care, and consumer engagement.
- (2) **Increase the ability of organizations to communicate effectively** with and support their employees and members.

Toolkit contents:

- **Materials for organizations to customize and distribute to employees and members** (Communication Materials). The materials include 16 documents grouped into four topic areas:
 - Understanding the basics of health care quality
 - Finding information you can trust on the Internet
 - Tips for getting good quality care
 - Making wise use of health care dollars
- **Practical guidance, tips, and suggestions for employers and other organizations** to help them adapt and use the materials.
- **Step-by-step, concrete guidance** that reflects lessons learned about how organizations can communicate effectively with their employees or members.
- **Real-world examples** and stories of how organizations have used the Toolkit, including examples of how organizations can adapt the materials without losing sight of key health literacy features.

The Toolkit is available online at:
<http://www.helpyouremployeeshealth.com/>

The Communication Toolkit was developed by the American Institutes for Research with funding from the California HealthCare Foundation.

How does the Communication Toolkit support health literacy?

To develop the Toolkit, we conducted a **series of formative research activities**.

These activities included literature and website reviews, key informant interviews, focus groups, individual interviews, and a national web survey of employees. We conducted this work with employers, unions, health care purchasers, researchers, consumer advocates, and consumers.

We also conducted an **18-month project with five leading California health care purchasers and one insurer** to implement and evaluate the Toolkit.

These organizations formed a Communication Collaborative based on the shared goals of supporting consumer engagement in health care, increasing health literacy around quality and evidence-based care, and helping consumers get high quality health care.

The organizations in the Collaborative adapted the Communication Materials and distributed them to employees and members. We then gathered feedback on the organizations' experiences and the results of their communication efforts.

Key challenges to increasing the health literacy of consumers

Our research illuminated **key challenges to increasing consumer literacy** around health care quality, evidence-based health care, and consumer engagement.

- **Consumers can feel overwhelmed by the demands of consumer engagement and what they think evidence-based health care is asking of them.** For many people, using evidence-based health care requires thinking about their health and health care in a new way, assuming more personal responsibility, and developing new skills (such as learning to speak up and ask questions of their health care providers). People often have concerns about these new responsibilities and behaviors - which affects their ability to understand and act on the information.
- **Consumers tend to be suspicious of employers' and health plans' motives in communicating about evidence-based health care.** In the absence of clear information about why their employer or health plan is communicating with them about these topics, consumers often assume that the underlying motive is about controlling costs.

“The materials gave us a forum to talk to members in a way we had never talked to them before that was much more straightforward than I think we had in the past. It allowed us to bring up subjects we hadn't brought up before like how to be prepared for an appointment.”

-Member of the Communications Collaborative

Lessons learned: Ways to increase the effectiveness of communications

Our implementation research identified ways organizations can help consumers increase their health literacy around evidence-based health care:

- **Meet consumers where they're at - learn about their information needs and concerns.** Organizations that took the time to learn about their audience (through focus groups, surveys, or getting feedback on draft materials) were much more successful in their communications.
- **Provide information coupled with specific action items.** Simply providing information is insufficient. The Communication Materials contain information along with simple, specific tasks for consumers to do. In their adaptations of the Communication Materials, some organizations deleted these action steps - and met with less success.
- **Use plain language and simple formatting.** The concepts covered in the Communication Materials are challenging, which makes the use of plain language that much more important. Even organizations with highly educated populations learned that plain language is important. Simple, clean formatting allows readers to focus on the information.
- **Personalize the materials.** Organizations that used examples, stories, and pictures in their materials were more successful in helping people realize that the information was relevant, interesting, and useful. Personalization also helps consumers understand how they could use and apply the information.
- **Be clear about your reasons for communicating.** No matter how clear the messages or materials, consumers won't use the information if they don't trust the source. Organizations that are transparent about their stake in the game (i.e., what they hope to get out of it) boost not only their credibility, but also the ability of people to accept the information.
- **Repeat and reinforce messages over time.** Developing health literacy is a process, not a one-time event. Creating a staged approach to communications or looking for ways to build on messages over time promotes longer-term health literacy.