

Building Capacity for Health Literacy Promotion: Preparing the Health Care Professional

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This project began as an exploration of existing health literacy (HL) training in higher education institutions in Colorado. The author searched multiple public websites of Colorado-based higher education institutions for evidence that HL concepts and techniques were being taught in health care-related fields. Course descriptions, required courses, and elective courses revealed minimal to no attention to HL principles, assessment strategies, or training techniques. There was some acknowledgement of its value included in policy statements, graduate reports, faculty bios, special projects, and continuing education. These indications of support however, were scattered and inconsistent. Although it is possible that HL may have been taught in the form of "patient education", or "communication," (also critical components in effective patient care), HL, as described in multiple medical and health care policy documents, encompasses a framework that is distinct from the traditional teachings on patient education and patient communication. The Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act (PPACA) of 2010 places a high value on promoting HL for patients; as well as makes a commitment, in the form of contracts and grants, to support HL education and research. The 2004 report of the Institute of Medicine, *Health Literacy: A Prescription to End Confusion* advocates for improved HL education for health care professionals; and likely contributed to the mandates on HL as directed in the PPACA. Successful implementation of HL training as directed in the PPACA requires targeted and coordinated capacity-building efforts. This project focuses on existing efforts in the promotion of HL education. It then proposes strategies to ensure that health professionals obtain the necessary knowledge, skills, and abilities to provide high-quality care that is considerate of the HL needs of their patients and clients.

Background Information

Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act [PPACA] (2010) ¹

- **Recognizes:** health care literacy as a component of quality health care.
- **Provides** (thru Department of Health and Human Services): Grants for HL promotion
- **Requires:** Patient Decision Aids to reflect varying needs of health literacy.



The Question:

Are health care professionals getting trained in Health Literacy techniques?

Public websites of higher education institutions in Colorado were reviewed and found:

1. Many course descriptions for the health care professions include patient communication; however this may or may not include specific health literacy practices
2. Some faculty CVs had training in health care literacy
3. Several course descriptions included communicating with diverse populations
4. Some special seminars and student showcases address health literacy

*****Educational opportunities specific to health literacy were quite limited.**

What can be done to better educate health care professionals in health care literacy?

- Collaborate with and learn from accrediting health education organizations
- Design health care curricula that include objectives related to HL (start with curricula that include "patient communication," "patient teaching" "patient education")
- Enlist support of information technology departments to make the multitude of free on-line HL training opportunities available to students in health care as well as practicing health care professionals
- For schools with the resources: access grant opportunities for HL education
- Continue work of Coleman, Hudson, Maine (2013) to establish consensus on the needed health literacy knowledge, skills, attitudes, practices in health professions.²

Some Examples of Curriculum Objectives:

By the end of the course, the student shall:

- Be able to assess health literacy levels using accepted health literacy assessment tools
- Use methods to assess for understanding of health information.
- Understand barriers to health literacy, such as culture, language, educational level, ethnicity.
- Determine appropriate decision aids for patients with various health literacy levels.

Support for Health Literacy Education

- The Joint Commission: "The safety of patients cannot be assured without mitigating the negative effects of low health literacy and ineffective communication on patient care." (p. 5)³
- Institute of Medicine: HL techniques should be incorporated into health professional education, continuing education, existing lesson plans.⁴
- US Department of Health and Human Services. National Action Plan to Improve Health Literacy.⁵

REFERENCES:

1. Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act, Pub. L. No. 111-148, §2702, 124 Stat. 119, 318-319 (2010).
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