

# Teaching Oral and Written Health Literacy Skills in an Undergraduate Pre-Clinical Program

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## The Problem:

There is ample evidence that the information given to patients in most healthcare settings is not understood (Kutner, et al, 2008). and that this lack of understanding leads to poor follow through and poor health outcomes (Berkman, et al, 2011). Health practitioners and administrators must take an active role in ensuring that universal precautions are used in health care settings (Patient Safety, 2007). However, professional clinical programs have difficulty finding the space and time in crowded curriculums to teach health literacy skills.

## The Solution

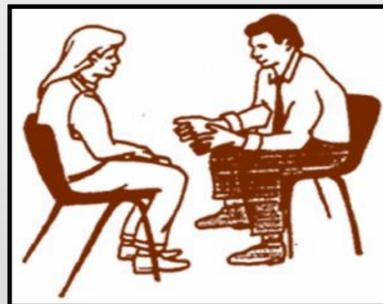
At the same time clinical programs are struggling to include health literacy in their curriculum, entry level clinical programs are moving up to master's and doctoral levels. As a result, students who want to enter those professions must first obtain a bachelor's degree. Yet, advanced level clinical programs seldom require a specific bachelor's degree and often very few pre-requisites. Basic health literacy skills can be built into Bachelor's level curriculums designed to prepare students for health-related graduate programs The Interdisciplinary Health Services Program at Western Michigan University includes a free standing health literacy course. The three credit hour course steeps students in a conceptual and evidence-based understanding of health literacy and teaches the skills needed including: using plain language, delivering patient education including teach back, developing accessible patient information, and facilitating health care navigation.

## Two Major Skill Building assignments.

### Patient Education and Teach back

Students are taught to develop a plain language patient education plan and to use teach back to make sure the plan is understood. At the end of this assignment students are able to:

- Prepare a clear patient education plain using the Ask Me Three© format
- Develop patient action steps in sufficient detail that a patient could carry them out.
- Adjust messages into plain language
- Deliver the patient education plan using strategies for clear communication
- Implement teach back to ensure patient comprehension.
- Using strategies to encourage patients to ask question



### Plain Language Pamphlets

Students develop a patient education Pamphlet that includes a learner verification review by adult literacy learners from the Kalamazoo Literacy Council. The college students gain the real world experience of writing for an audience with low literacy skills. The adult literacy learners gain basic health information in exchange for this essential learner verification. Future plans include building a library of pamphlets to use in tutoring at the literacy center.

At the end of this assignment IHS students are able to:

- Use the NIH Plain Language Checklist to construct a pamphlet containing basic health information.
- Edit writing by using the Plain Language Thesaurus.

The image shows three sample health literacy pamphlets. The first, 'Why does it hurt?', explains that padding between bones is breaking down and that less padding means bones rub together. The second, 'Are you overweight?', asks the doctor if weight is healthy and notes that losing 5 pounds takes 20 pounds of pressure off knees. The third, 'What can you do to help the pain?', provides a checklist for losing weight, including eating healthy foods and staying away from unhealthy foods. It also includes a checklist for healthy meals and a sample day of healthy meals (breakfast, lunch, dinner).

## Outcomes/Impact

Although these approaches to teaching health literacy skills have not been empirically tested. Anecdotal evidence suggests:

- Students enter graduate programs and careers with an appreciation for the importance of health literacy practices
- Some students become very strong advocates of health literacy practices as evidenced by honors theses, policy papers, and internships pursued in this area.
- Students are in a position to add disciplinary knowledge to their ability to use plain language rather than having to learn to use plain language after learning disciplinary vocabulary.
- Graduate professors report that students come into role plays and simulations with clear ideas how to organize their interactions with their patients and often use handouts.

## Selected References

Ask me Three (2004) National Patient Safety Foundation. Retrieved from [www.npsf.org/askme3](http://www.npsf.org/askme3)

Berkman ND, Sheridan SL, Donahue KE, Halpern DJ, Crotty K. (2011). Low health literacy and health outcomes: an updated systematic review. *Ann Intern Med.*;155:97-107.

Kutner M, Greenberg E, Jin Y, Paulsen C. (2006). The Health Literacy of America's Adults: Results From the 2003 National Assessment of Adult Literacy .NCES 2006-483). Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Education, National Center For Education Statistics.

Health Literacy and Patient Safety: Help Patients Understand. (2007). American Medical Association. *Health Literacy: A Framework for Understanding and Action.* John Wiley & Sons, San Francisco.

- Use a readability tool to assess readability.
- Revise written materials based on learner evaluations.