

Tips for Medical Interpreters to Best Navigate Low Health Literacy

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What is Health Literacy?

- Health literacy is the degree to which individuals have the capacity to obtain, process, and understand basic health information and services needed to make appropriate health decisions.
- Health literacy is dependent on individual and systematic factors:
 - Communication skills of lay persons and professionals.
 - Lay and professional knowledge of health topics.
 - Culture.
 - Demands of the health and public health systems.
 - Demands of the situation/context.
- Health literacy affects people's ability to:
 - Navigate the healthcare system, including filling out complex forms and locating providers and services.
 - Share personal information, such as health history, with providers.
 - Engage in self-care and chronic-disease management.
 - Understand mathematical concepts such as probability and risk.
 - All taken directly from health.gov.

Health Literacy Among LEP Patients:

- A study on overall health, health literacy, and English proficiency published in the Journal of Health Communication reported the following information:
 - 44.9% of LEP patients reported having low health literacy.
 - 13.8% of English speaking patients reported a low health literacy.
 - 45.1% of LEP patients who reported low health literacy were found to be in poor health.
- Not only is low health literacy much more common in the LEP population, but it is adversely affecting them.

How to Recognize Low Health Literacy in a patient (hint: they won't tell you):

- Answering "yes" to every question, or offering very brief, one word answers.
- Avoiding eye contact.
- A glazed-over expression.
- An inability to repeat the instructions they just received.
- Looking to family members for answers or support, even regarding basic instructions.

Adopting a Universal Precautions Approach:

- Structure your delivery of care as if everyone may have a limited health literacy because:
 - You cannot tell by looking at someone whether or not they have a low health literacy.
 - Anxiety can reduce the ability to manage health information.
 - Everyone benefits from clear communication.