



Clinical Update

For Telephone Triage Nurses

March 2017

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Improving Health Literacy Skills in Your Call Center

Health literacy, according to the Institute of Medicine (2004), 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.”* Many times, those of us who work in health care think of limited health literacy as a “patient problem.” However, we also contribute to the problem of limited health literacy if we do not communicate clearly with patients. This includes how we talk with patients and how we provide information in written materials.

Consequences of Limited Health Literacy

Limited health literacy can lead to poor health outcomes and unnecessary patient deaths. It also contributes to poor patient satisfaction and increased health care costs. Patients with limited health literacy might:

- Take the wrong medicine or too much or too little of a medication
- Miss scheduled tests or appointments
- Fail to recognize serious complications or symptoms
- Have difficulty managing complex medical problems like diabetes
- Avoid asking questions when they do not understand health information
- Feel dissatisfied and frustrated with their health care

Risk Factors of Limited Health Literacy

Some groups of people are more at risk for limited health literacy. Included are the elderly and those who have limited income or education. People who use English as second language or are unable to speak English are also at risk.

However, any person at any given time can have limited health literacy. This includes those who are very educated and articulate. The following factors can interfere with a person’s ability to understand health information:

- Lack of adequate sleep
- Fear or anxiety related to a new diagnosis or the unknown
- Health problems or medicines that hinder a person’s ability to think or concentrate
- Lack of experience with the health care system
- Lack of knowledge about a person’s body and how it functions
- Health information that is very complex or filled with medical jargon

Of all the factors that contribute to limited health literacy, the one factor health care workers have most control over is the way we communicate with patients.

SCOPE OF PROBLEM

An estimated 90 million adults in the United States have limited health literacy. (Institute of Medicine, 2004)

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Telephone Triage Health Literacy Skills

Because you can't really tell if a given caller might be at risk, use the following **Universal Health Literacy Precautions** with every call:

- Avoid medical jargon (use patient-friendly words). For example, use "heart attack" instead of "myocardial infarction" and "rinse" or "wash" instead of "irrigate".
- Use shorter sentences and shorter words when possible. Examples: Use "get" instead of "obtain" and "decrease" instead of "mitigate".
- Talk to the patient like you are talking to your grandmother or sister/brother. Imagine that this family member was sitting in your living room.
- Avoid giving too much information at one time. For triage, focus on what the patient needs to do now and why is it important for the patient to do this.
- Verify patient understanding during and at end of call. Use the teach-back method.

Call Center Strategies to Promote Health Literacy

- Include health literacy training in your orientation of new staff (including nurses and front-end staff).
- Assess health literacy skills (listed above) when reviewing taped calls. You will find certain problem words (medical jargon) that should be replaced with plain language terms. Share these findings with staff and use it as a learning opportunity for all.
- Include health literacy topics and exercises in your ongoing staff education.
- Make sure the materials you send to patients electronically or by mail are patient-friendly and easy to understand. Resources for creating patient-friendly written materials can be found at:

<https://www.cdc.gov/healthliteracy/developmaterials/plainlanguage.html>

Schmitt-Thompson Telephone Triage Guidelines

The patient care advice statements in the Schmitt-Thompson guidelines are written using patient-friendly language. We use plain language and instructions that are easy to understand. This allows the triager to provide the care advice as written during the call.

One last plain language tip for triagers:

We often use the word **triage** during our patient encounters. Example: "Would you like me to triage your symptoms?" Callers who are unfamiliar with telephone triage may be confused by this term. Instead, explain **triage** using more patient-friendly words such as: *Would you like to talk to me more about your symptoms? I could then help you decide if you need to be seen for this problem, and how soon.*

References

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Test Your Health Literacy Skills – A Plain Language Exercise

Here is a plain language exercise that includes common terms and concepts that telehealth providers use during calls. Read the medical term and then think about what might be a better plain language term. Suggested answers are provided to the right.

Medical Term		A Better Plain Language Term	
1	Abdomen	1	
2	Analgesic	2	
3	Anxiety	3	
4	Bacteria	4	
5	Bone fracture	5	
6	Cardiac disease	6	
7	Cardiologist	7	
8	Contraception	8	
9	Corneal abrasion	9	
10	Cyanosis	10	
11	Demonstrate	11	
12	Facilitate	12	
13	Feces	13	
14	Flank	14	
15	Heart failure	15	
16	Hypertension	16	
17	Insomnia	17	
18	Injection	18	
19	Interferes with activity	19	
20	Jaundice	20	
21	Menses	21	
22	Monitor	22	
23	Perineum	23	
24	Pharyngitis	24	
25	Primary care provider	25	
26	Radiate	26	
27	Retractions	27	
28	Sternum	28	
29	Stridor	29	
30	Sutures	30	
31	Tympanic membrane	31	
32	Umbilicus	32	
33	Urinate	33	
34	Vomit	34	
35	Wheezing	35	

- Answer Key – Plain Language Terms:**
- 1) belly, stomach area
 - 2) pain killer, pain medicine
 - 3) feeling stressed, nervous, or worried
 - 4) germs
 - 5) broken bone
 - 6) heart problem
 - 7) heart doctor
 - 8) birth control
 - 9) scratch on the outer eye
 - 10) bluish color of lips or skin
 - 11) show
 - 12) help
 - 13) stool, bowel movement
 - 14) (BM), poop
 - 15) side
 - 16) heart isn't pumping well; heart muscles are weak
 - 17) high blood pressure
 - 18) problem sleeping
 - 19) shot
 - 20) keeps you from doing things like working or going to school
 - 21) yellow skin or eyes
 - 22) monthly period
 - 23) keep track of
 - 24) bottom, private area
 - 25) sore throat
 - 26) your regular doctor
 - 27) travels to another place (such as pain)
 - 28) skin sucks in between the ribs with each breath
 - 29) loud harsh sound with breathing in
 - 30) stitches
 - 31) eardrum
 - 32) belly button, navel
 - 33) pee, pass urine
 - 34) throw up
 - 35) high pitched whistling sound with breathing out