Addressing Health Literacy in Memphis

Members of Healthy Memphis Common Table have begun a project to improve health literacy in the Memphis area. Health literacy is defined as an individual’s ability to obtain, process and understand basic health information and services that he or she needs to make appropriate health decisions. The 2007 Memphis Health Literacy Survey randomly selected over 650 people by phone to answer questions about their healthcare and their health literacy.

Education level is strongly associated with health literacy.

- The percentage of people who reported problems with health information decreased as the education level rose.
- Unfortunately, 23.6% (close to ¼) of Memphians over age 25 do not have the equivalent of a high school diploma according to the 2000 census. The red dots on the graph represent this quarter of the adult population in Memphis among whom 90-100% of the people surveyed indicated problems with health literacy.
- Even among college graduates, 40% reported problems.

Although many people think there are big differences in quality between hospitals and doctors:

- Only 31% have seen information comparing hospitals.
- Only 15% have seen information comparing doctors.
- Only 47% could correctly identify 1 or more of the most important services for adults to get from their doctors.

Understanding health information is especially important to people with chronic diseases.

- The nature of their diseases calls for greater ability to participate in medical decision-making and to follow instructions that are likely to be more complicated.
- Diabetics, surveyed as an example of patients with chronic disease, had more problems with health literacy.

Survey questions to determine health literacy:

- How often do you have problems learning about your medical condition because of difficulty understanding written information?
- How confident are you filling out medical forms by yourself?
- How often do you have someone help you read hospital materials?

This work is in support of the Aligning Forces for Quality: Memphis Regional Market Project, which is part of a national program of the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation (RWJF). Healthy Memphis Common Table has been selected to join 13 other regional markets in the RWJF’s Aligning Forces for Quality (AF4Q) initiative. The goal of this national effort is to align critical components of the health sector to advance quality care and improve patient outcomes.
Who do Memphians trust for health information?

When people were asked to rate their level of trust in different sources of health information, with 0 being no trust and 10 being complete trust, they ranked healthcare professionals first, church and family next, then media, with friends and neighbors last.

Healthy Memphis Common Table has assembled a Consumer Engagement Working Group to lead a multi-faceted campaign to improve essential health literacy in our community. The team involves national experts including:

- Jennifer Sweeney, Director of the Health Care Quality Project at the National Partnership for Women & Families
- Marketing consultants, Robert Wood Johnson Foundation
- Leadership from various Healthy Memphis Community Partners
- Faculty from University of Memphis and University of Tennessee Health Science with expertise in health care delivery, communication, survey methods, and health coalitions

The Working Group is:

- Developing materials that will explain essential health information in simple terms
- Working with The Commercial Appeal, a Healthy Memphis Community Partner, to publish the weekly “Healthy Families – Take Charge” series
- Pilot testing brochures, fact sheets, and new patient counseling techniques in selected clinics

What can you do?

- Become a Community Partner
- Sign up to help distribute essential health literacy material
- Host meetings at your organization to emphasize most important health care

### Essential Health Literacy

There are many facets to good health care, but these services are considered by most authorities to be fundamental for adults. A patient who understands which healthcare behaviors are most important is better able to work with his or her healthcare provider to maintain good health and deal with chronic disease.

#### Health behaviors
- Eliminating tobacco use
- Eating vegetables and fruits
- Physical activity

#### Preventive care
- Blood pressure checks
- Monitoring height and weight
- Cholesterol testing
- Pap smears
- Colon cancer screening
- Discussing daily aspirin use to prevent heart attacks

#### Chronic disease care

For hypertension:
- Blood pressure control

For diabetes:
- Blood pressure control
- HbA1C (long-term blood sugar level) measure and control
- LDL cholesterol control
- Eye exams

For congestive heart failure:
- Blood pressure treatment with ACE inhibitors or ARB drugs
- Echocardiogram to check heart pump function

For coronary disease:
- Drug therapy for lowering LDL cholesterol
- Beta-blocker drug treatment after heart attack
- Daily aspirin use

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Prepared by Healthy Memphis Data Center, a collaborative effort of University of Tennessee Health Science Center, University of Memphis, Memphis/Shelby County Health Department and Healthy Memphis Common Table.