
Health Literacy and Health Care Quality

"You can't have quality care unless you have health literacy woven throughout the program and the care that's provided"

-Linda Johnston Lloyd, M.Ed., senior advisor and health literacy coordinator for the Health Resources and Services Administration.¹

What constitutes quality health care?

According to the Institute of Medicine's *Crossing the Quality Chasm: A New Health System for the 21st Century*² quality health care should be:

- *Safe*—avoiding injuries to patients from the care that is intended to help them.
- *Effective*—providing services based on scientific knowledge to all who could benefit and refraining from providing services to those not likely to benefit (avoiding underuse and overuse, respectively).
- *Patient-centered*—providing care that is respectful of and responsive to individual patient preferences, needs, and values and ensuring that patient values guide all clinical decisions.
- *Timely*—reducing waits and sometimes harmful delays for both those who receive and those who give care.
- *Efficient*—avoiding waste, including waste of equipment, supplies, ideas, and energy.
- *Equitable*—providing care that does not vary in quality because of personal characteristics such as gender, ethnicity, geographic location, and socioeconomic status.

In other words, quality health care is doing the *Right Thing* (evidence-based process, appropriate) for the *Right Patient*, in the *Right Way* (technical competence), at the *Right Time* (sequencing, timeliness), with the *Right Resources* (efficiency)³

How do health literacy issues affect quality of care?

Miscommunication between patients and providers can lead to errors in delivery of care⁴

- Failure to get accurate medical histories can lead to ineffective or inappropriate care
- Failure to obtain informed consent (a violation of ethical standards of practice) can occur when a patient does not fully understand the provider
- Poor health knowledge and understanding of health conditions can result in improper self- and home-care
- Poor treatment adherence results from a patient not understanding why they have been given certain treatments or how they should follow written/oral directions from their doctor
- Medication errors commonly result from low health literacy

Individuals with low health literacy are:

- Less likely to receive preventive and other health-care services
- More likely to report lower patient satisfaction

Health literacy affects a person's ability to effectively manage their health condition

- HIV positive individuals with low health literacy
 - Have more severe infections
 - Are less likely to take their medications⁵
 - Are less likely to report important information to their provider
 - Are more likely to hold incorrect ideas about HIV transmission⁶
- Diabetics with lower health literacy
 - Have poorer blood sugar control
 - Are more likely to experience eye damage than those with higher health literacy^{7,8}
- Asthma patients with higher reading levels were more likely to:
 - Demonstrate increased knowledge about their condition
 - Use their inhaler appropriately⁹
- Those with low health literacy are more likely to report signs of depression¹⁰

Joint Commission recommendations¹¹

- Make effective communications an organizational priority to protect the safety of patients
- Address patients' communication needs across the continuum of care
- Pursue policy changes that promote improved practitioner-patient communications

References

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