




# HEALTH LITERACY

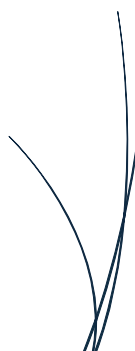
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This spotlight on health literacy is part of a collection of publications prepared by the research team of the School of Medicine at the University of Crete. The publication series hopes to address important topics relevant to promoting health and well-being in health and community settings. This document does not serve any commercial purpose and has been prepared for educational purposes. The main objective is to share the published research with international organizations and medical student residents, PhD students, and early-career researchers.

In this spotlight, we discuss the important correlation between health literacy and improved quality of patient care. The aim is to summarise the work of our team at the University of Crete in advancing our knowledge, experience, and understanding in this area. The following researchers have contributed:


C. Lionis, M. Anastasaki and S. Papadakis



## **Health Literacy: An Introduction**

It is important when speaking about health literacy that we start by defining the term. Health literacy is defined by the WHO as the “personal knowledge and competencies that enable people to access, understand, appraise and use health information and services to promote and maintain good health and wellbeing for themselves and their communities” (1). In short, health literacy is a means of empowering patients and individuals to exert greater control over their health and engage in preventive care.

There is a well established association between increased health literacy and better health status (2). While it is known that health literacy is associated with socio-economic factors, research has shown that in some countries health literacy is a stronger predictor of an individual’s health status than income, employment status, education level, and racial or ethnic group (1). This suggests that among people and groups experiencing lower socio-economic status, improving health literacy can have substantial benefits. In Europe, sub-optimal levels of health literacy have been documented (3). As such, improving health

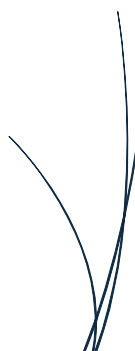



literacy has been identified as an important target for healthcare provision, health systems, and communities for improving the health status of patients and populations.

### **Review of the published works**

It is known that low patient health literacy contributes to lower quality of health care and health status across many societal groups.(4,5) Low health literacy levels and their effects have been observed not only in the general population ([4](#), [5](#)) but also in patients with chronic medical diseases ([6](#),[7](#),[8](#),[9](#),[10](#)) and in ethnic and sociocultural vulnerable groups ([11](#),[12](#),[13](#),[14](#)).

Several studies have documented lower health literacy among patients with chronic diseases when compared to healthy individuals ([5](#)). While the cause of this is unknown, this finding is important because low levels of health literacy limit patients' active participation in decision-making about their care, which in turn leads healthcare professionals to shift from patient-centered to paternalistic care ([6](#)).

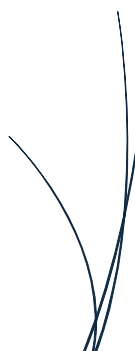





Interventions tested in numerous countries aimed at improving how doctors support health literacy among patients with chronic conditions have consistently demonstrated positive results on health and quality of care. While interventions aimed at increasing patients' health literacy have shown that improvements in their knowledge can be achieved (6), data also support that efforts to increase health literacy vary, and patients' attitudes and beliefs appear to play an important mediating role.

Higher levels of health literacy can also benefit informal caregivers, especially during times of crises such as COVID-19, as ensuring access to important health information and resources can empower them to take actions to protect their health and well-being (7).

Research has also shown that individuals in different countries displayed both different levels of health literacy (9,10). Additionally, there are different levels of interest in receiving information to increase health literacy, such as using the Internet, rather than face-to-face contact with medical



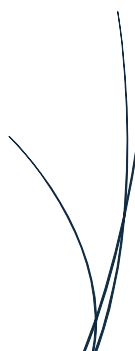


professionals to improve their knowledge (7). An international study, conducted by our team at the University of Crete, found different rates of health literacy among patients at high risk of disease between countries involved (8). Results indicate the complexity of such attempts and the need for country-specific approaches to improve health literacy.

In the general population, health illiteracy is strongly associated with high levels of perceived stress. More importantly it has been stated that health illiteracy and stress could create a vicious cycle as low levels of health literacy cause stress because people don't have the ability to effectively deal with health issues and stress hinders their ability to improve their health literacy (8).

### **Vulnerable populations**

Studies of vulnerable and low-resource populations, as well as ethnic minority groups (11,12,13,14), such as Roma, migrants, and refugees, have highlighted low health literacy and the health inequity they face as important determinants of health status. To address these issues, it has been suggested that

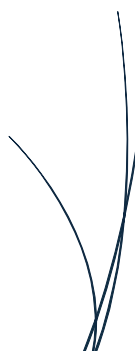


medical professionals need to be trained accordingly. Supporting health care professionals to have a good understanding of how the healthcare system works in their country of origin and, in the case of refugees, how it works in the countries they are likely to travel through (13). This is supported by studies examining the needs of refugees, which highlight that they lack information regarding the organization of healthcare in arrival countries (9). Health care professionals should also tailor their approach according to the refugees' level of health literacy (13). Such training interventions have been shown to have a double positive and long-lasting effect (18,19). Firstly, they increase migrants' accessibility, sense of empowerment, and trust in the health care they receive, making them more willing to take risks when making suggestions and more confident in confronting issues. Secondly, in clinical practice, they lead to greater safety, as doctors report having a clearer picture of their patients' symptoms and increased confidence in their ability to deliver quality patient care (18).




## **In summary**

In improving people's low levels of literacy medical professionals play an important role as it has been shown that they can address problems such as vaccine hesitancy, acute and chronic disease management and disease prevention (8). Supporting patient health literacy should be top of mind in clinical interactions, within health care organization's such as hospitals and primary care, and health system planning with the understanding of the very strong relationship between health literacy and improved quality of health care provision and health outcomes.

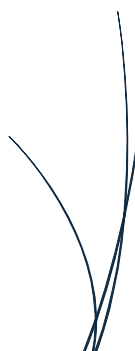


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