

## Health Literacy – the agenda we cannot afford to ignore

### A joint briefing from the Community Health & Learning Foundation and the Health Literacy Group UK

March 2015

This briefing provides an overview of the important agenda of health literacy and outlines the extent of the level of need and its economic impact. It concludes with four key priority policy actions. It is a key point summary of a longer policy briefing from the Community Health & Learning Foundation.

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#### What is health literacy?

The World Health Organisation definition is: *‘... the achievement of a level of knowledge, personal skills and confidence to take action to improve personal and community health by changing personal lifestyles and living conditions. Thus, health literacy means more than being able to read pamphlets and make appointments. By improving people’s access to health information, and their capacity to use it effectively, health literacy is critical to empowerment.’*<sup>i</sup>

Health literacy is central in the complex links between health inequalities, income and skills and is critical to inclusive growth for local and national policy as the economy moves out of the recession<sup>ii</sup>. It recognises a shared responsibility between government, local institutions, employers and people in addressing the socio/economic factors that impact on health.

#### The scale of the problem

Recent research on the mismatch between the population’s health literacy and the skills<sup>iii</sup> needed to navigate and understand the system shows that **43 per cent of people aged 16 – 65 are unable to effectively understand and use health information, this rises to 61 per cent if maths is involved**. This means that between 15 and 21 million people of the working age population in England may not be able to access the information they need to become and stay healthy.

This is significantly higher than those who lack basic literacy and numeracy skills and highlights the multi-dimensional nature of health literacy

#### The economic implications

##### Low health literacy is expensive.

American research shows that the cost of poor health literacy is **between 3-5 per cent of the health budget a year**<sup>iv</sup>. It found that at a patient level the additional expenditures per year for each person with limited health literacy as compared to an individual with adequate health literacy range from \$143 to \$7,798. In England, the NHS budget is £95.6 billion<sup>v</sup> - a

saving of 3-5 per cent from effective health literacy would be in the range of **£2.87 billion to £4.78 billion**.

### **Implications for the NHS**

Low health literacy leads, among other things, to widening health inequalities, patients not understanding written information, patients not understanding what health practitioners tell them, patients not adhering to medication instructions, people not being able to follow healthy lifestyle advice and patients being passive recipients rather than active partners in their care. This, in turn, has significant clinical and financial impacts e.g. patients by default going to A&E (cost £111 per visit) or dialling 999. An emergency ambulance call costs an additional £455. In comparison, a GP attendance costs £32.

### **What needs to change?**

Health literacy is a complex issue and needs collaborative cross-sectional approaches, particularly between the health and learning sectors. At the Community Health & Learning Foundation and the Health Literacy Group UK we have identified three priority actions needed at a national and local level to ensure effective health literacy:

- a cross-government strategic approach to recognise the economic and social impact of health literacy and its role in addressing health inequalities and wellbeing;
- the integration and adoption of health literacy as a core literacy within education and skills policies;
- the development of a health literate system with clinical commissioning groups prioritising practitioner awareness.

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<sup>i</sup> World Health Organisation (1998) *Health Promotion Glossary*:

[http://www.healthliteracypromotion.com/upload/hp\\_glossary\\_en.pdf](http://www.healthliteracypromotion.com/upload/hp_glossary_en.pdf)

<sup>ii</sup> For a detailed discussion see Benzeval M et al. (2014) *How does money influence health?* JRF

<http://www.jrf.org.uk/publications/how-does-money-influence-health>

<sup>iii</sup> Rowlands et al (2012) *Defining and describing the mismatch between population health literacy and numeracy and health system complexity* 2014 submitted for publication – a note of interim findings available at <http://www1.lsbu.ac.uk/php5c-cgiwrap/hscweb/cm2/public/news/news.php?newsid=115>

<sup>iv</sup> Eichler, K., Wieser, S., Brugger, U. (2009). *The costs of limited health literacy: a systematic review*.

International Journal of Public Health, <http://www.springerlink.com/content/n7327r1t181665t3/fulltext.pdf>

<sup>v</sup> <http://www.england.nhs.uk/allocations-2013-14/>