

Communicating so patients understand

by Mark Collins



Imagine a world where patients and healthcare professionals speak the same language and are always in sync. Everyone understands complex treatment options, discharge instructions, and follow-up care. Patient compliance is as close to 100% as possible.

This would be a world of almost perfect health literacy. Patient health and satisfaction would be at their highest levels. There would be significantly fewer unnecessary emergency room visits. Hospital re-admissions would be reduced. Medical errors and complications would be problems of a by-gone era. Billing misunderstandings would hardly exist. Sounds like an unbelievable dream...

While we all realize that we're a long way from this utopia, more effective communications and greatly improved health literacy are more than achievable. As you consider the challenges you face in communicating with a diverse cross-section of people in your hospital, let's look at how the world has changed and how you now need to address the needs of your unique demographics.

Considering that our country is truly a melting pot where many patients are unfamiliar with our language and culture, what, for example, does a recent immigrant from Pakistan living in Wichita do when faced with a medical emergency—one that might require hospitalization? Will someone communicate to him in his language of choice and in a culturally appropriate manner? Will he understand the care that's being offered to him? And will that care be provided with a level of sensitivity that he's comfortable with?

Health literacy is defined in Health People 2010 as: "The degree to which individuals have the capacity to obtain, process, and understand basic health information and services needed to make appropriate health decisions."

How do you know if your patients and their families even have the necessary skills to understand symptoms, treatment options, and associated risks? Do they know how and when to take their medications? These aren't necessarily just language barriers but barriers to understanding as well. Are your messages being perceived in the way you intend? Do your patients have the tools to even ask the right questions, so you can measure the impact of your communications and patient education programs?

According to the CMS, the top criterion for patient education materials is that they're easy to understand. Sounds simple enough, right? But as we examine this subjective statement, what is the CMS' true intent? They recommend that patient education and compliance materials adhere to the principals of plain language, including:

- Communicating in an active voice
- Having a specific focus
- Using appropriate and believable graphics
- Including interactive elements, such as questions, to engage the reader
- Providing additional sources, such as websites, for more information

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Some studies indicate that up to 90% of adults may not have the skills needed to manage their health and prevent disease. As daunting as these statistics may be, as marketers, your challenge is not only to provide pertinent and meaningful information to your constituents in order to improve health literacy, but to deliver it in ways that inspire their ability to understand and take timely and appropriate action.

Marketing communications need to play a bigger role in the implementation of effective health literacy programs. Now that the CMS has defined patient engagement as one of the five pillars of meaningful use of electronic health records (EHR's), health literacy is becoming more and more center stage for marketers. (For more information on CMS' role in patient activation and engagement, please visit www.cms.gov/EHRIncentivePrograms.) The benefits of improved health literacy will help drive additional service line revenue as people learn about your services and have a better understanding of how to access care, among others.

As most health professionals generally agree, health literacy and the delivery of health literacy has room for improvement. The consensus is that while medical terminology is simple, plain language for clinicians, it's confusing for patients and their families. Patient engagement begins with understanding, and when patients understand, they can begin to take appropriate action. Tackling communications challenges head on will help you get your messages across sooner and better define your hospital's position in your marketplace.

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