The Importance of Patient Health Literacy in Medicine
Navvin Sadarangani

Health literacy is the degree to which an individual can understand and use information about their health to make informed decisions and has an active role in their medical care. Some skills contributing to a patient's literacy level include recognizing how to obtain and utilize their health information, communicating effectively with healthcare providers, and understanding medical instructions, treatment plans, and outcomes. The influence of health literacy on patient outcomes will be investigated in nutrition habits, pharmaceutical education, and patient adherence. Knowledge of one's health is a vital component of living a *full*, healthy life and is overlooked by healthcare professionals. Setting a strong foundation of knowledge can improve adherence to treatment, health outcomes, patient satisfaction, and communication between patients and their providers.

Nutrition

Nutrition is a core component of our well-being, yet more than 40% of people in the United States suffer from Obesity (C.D.C., 2022). Among the 40%, many suffer from a reduction in bodily function, an increase in mental problems, a reduction in life expectancy, and the development of life-altering conditions such as diabetes, hypertension, heart disease, and cancers, to name a few. Conditions have gotten so dire that the World Health Organization has classed obesity as an epidemic (W.H.O., n.d.). Most cases of obesity result from factors such as unhealthy eating habits, low physical activity levels, and social and cultural factors (C.D.C., 2022). This is where health literacy can be a powerful tool in combatting the obesity epidemic.

Most people have a general understanding of "bad" nutritional habits, but they lack an in-depth understanding of the direct outcomes of these habits. It is easy for patients to dismiss health advice when providers give a generic blanket

statement such as "eating a lot of sugar is not good for you." Alternatively, it would have more of an impact on a patient's mindset if the same advice had a quantified outcome such as, "Frequently eating sugar can lead to diabetes since it creates insulin resistance, and cancer since it promotes cancer cell growth." Since nutrition isn't taught at a high level in our education system, knowledge of the adverse effects of poor diets catches people by surprise. Proactively educating patients on the importance of nutrition instead of taking a reactional approach will allow patients to make informed decisions on their own and may prevent the need for frequently prescribed pharmaceutical interventions.

Pharmaceuticals

Sometimes, despite all efforts to promote patients' health literacy, pharmaceutical intervention may still be necessary. In these cases, it is just as essential to keep patients informed and educated about their treatment since information on medicine is less readily available and comprehensible to the average person compared to nutrition and fitness information. Medications come in all shapes, sizes, and side effects; and commonly have enigmatic names. These factors may cause fear, confusion, lapses in therapy, or accidental overdoses. As medical professionals, it is our duty to educate patients on their medical treatment instead of prescribing with no patient input.

An important thing to note is that there is no one-size-fits-all regarding medications. Previous pharmacogenetic research uncovered differences in drug metabolism, clinical effectiveness, and side-effect profiles of many drugs depending on the individual (Burroughs et al., 2002). Therefore, optimal clinical care will involve assessing risks with patients, discussing potential side effects, and weighing the pros and cons of different drug therapies.

Patients need to have an informed role in their care since they may have more than one healthcare provider. Having adequate knowledge of their medications can prevent accidental drug interactions or overdoses between different prescribers; knowledge of their health and treatment goals can improve the continuity between different specialties working towards a common goal; and setting realistic expectations can improve patient satisfaction, adherence to treatment, and overall outlook on their life.

Patient Adherence

Ultimately, despite these approaches, optimal healthcare outcomes will come down to patients' adherence to treatment regimens. Too frequently, patient nonadherence significantly threatens their health and wellness. Over 40% of patients with some disease conditions sustain significant risks by misunderstanding, forgetting, or ignoring medical advice (Martin et al., 2005).

Although a multifactorial issue, a vast majority of cases can potentially be solved with adequate amounts of patient education and by nurturing a supportive learning environment. After all, patients learning about their health is similar to adults learning a new language; in this case, that language is medicine and not native to the everyday person. Learning the *why*, as opposed to only learning the *what* will allow patients to make informed decisions.
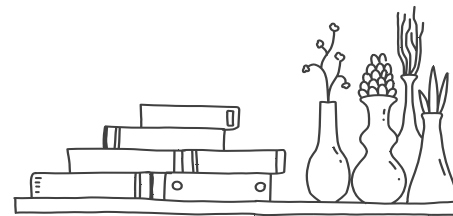
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