

Health Literacy: Policy Implications and Opportunities

Health care policymakers nationwide are seeking to expand insurance coverage, improve care, and control costs. To meet these goals, health care programs must focus on the cultural, linguistic, and social barriers facing vulnerable populations, including those with low health literacy.

Affordable Care Act

The Affordable Care Act (ACA)¹ is the most significant piece of health care legislation in recent history. Though there are only four explicit mentions of the term “health literacy” in the law, the ACA indirectly addresses this topic in the following areas:²

1. **Coverage Expansion:** Millions of Americans will gain insurance through the state-based exchanges and Medicaid beginning in 2014.³ For such expansion to be successful, outreach efforts and enrollment methods must be streamlined, easy to understand, and coordinated with other social services and community programs.
2. **Equity:** Moving toward universal coverage and creating the same “floor” for the lowest-income populations should help address some of the fundamental disparities in access to care, but only if there is attention to culture, language, and literacy.
3. **Workforce:** Provider training and diversity provisions in the ACA will help build a workforce with the background, cultural competency, and patient-centered orientation to adequately meet care needs across all levels of patient health literacy.
4. **Health Care Information:** From medication management to provider performance rating, patient information must be presented in a way that is accessible to the millions of Americans with low literacy skills.
5. **Public Health and Wellness:** The development of consumer information – whether in print, electronically, or otherwise – on issues ranging from prevention to emergency preparedness must be done with low literacy in mind, and in partnership with local communities.
6. **Quality Improvement:** The promotion of payment and delivery system redesign models such as health homes and accountable care organizations, and emphasis on quality measurement and reporting presents many new opportunities for making the business and policy case for investments in health literacy.

HEALTH LITERACY SNAPSHOT

A young, unemployed mother is unable to obtain coverage for her children because she cannot read the Medicaid application and feels uncomfortable asking for help. She and her family continue to go without care.

Additional Federal Policy Efforts Related to Health Literacy

National Action Plan to Improve Health Literacy

The *National Action Plan to Improve Health Literacy*, released in 2010 by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, outlines seven goals that address the importance of health and safety information that is accurate, accessible, and actionable. It addresses how payers, the media, government agencies, health care professionals, and community institutions can work together to tackle the national problem of low health literacy.⁴

This is one in a series of health literacy fact sheets that address topics like identifying low health literacy and improving print and oral communications, produced with support from Kaiser Permanente Community Benefit. For more information, visit www.chcs.org.

Plain Writing Act of 2010

This legislation requires the federal government, including all health agencies, to use “plain writing” guidelines in every covered document – both print and electronic. This includes every document that agencies issue or substantially revise, including letters, publications, forms, notices, or instructions. It also includes any document necessary for the public to obtain a federal government benefit or service; file taxes; or comply with federal requirements.⁵

Healthy People 2020

*Healthy People 2020*⁶ is a set of 10-year goals for improving the health of Americans. It provides national benchmarks for meeting specific aims around health promotion and disease prevention. Several objectives explicitly speak to health literacy principles.⁷

National Resources to Address Health Literacy

Following are a variety of resources available to health care policymakers, providers, and administrators looking to address health literacy (visit the hyperlinks below to access each resource).

- **Health and Human Services (HHS)**
 - Overview and Resources
 - Health Literacy Action Plan
 - A Guide to Writing and Designing Easy-to-Use Health Web Sites
 - Expanding the Reach and Impact of Consumer e-Health Tools
- **Center for Disease Control (CDC)**
 - Health Literacy Resources
- **National Institutes of Health (NIH)**
 - Clear Communication: A NIH Health Literacy Initiative
- **Health Resources and Services Administration (HRSA)**
 - Free Online Course for Health Professionals and Students
- **Agency for Healthcare Research and Quality (AHRQ)**
 - Health Literacy Universal Precautions Toolkit
- **Institute of Medicine (IOM)**
 - Roundtable on Health Literacy
- **Surgeon General**
 - Improving Health by Improving Health Literacy
- **The Joint Commission**
 - Improving Health Literacy to Protect Patient Safety

*“Health literacy is the
currency for everything
we do.”*

Dr. Howard Koh
Assistant Secretary for Health,
U.S. Department of Health and Human
Services, 2010

¹ U.S. Congress, “H.R. 3590: Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act.” 11th Congress, 2009 – 2010. Signed into law March 23, 2010. Available at: <http://www.govtrack.us/congress/bill.xpd?bill=h111-3590>.

² S.A. Somers and R. Mahadevan. *Health Literacy Implications of the Affordable Care Act*. Center for Health Care Strategies. November 2010

³ Banthin J and Masi S. (March 2013). How Has CBO’s Estimate of the Net Budgetary Impact of the Affordable Care Act’s Health Insurance Coverage Provisions Changed Over Time? Congressional Budget Office. Available at: <http://www.cbo.gov/publication/44008>.

⁴ U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Office of Disease Prevention and Health Promotion. *National Action Plan to Improve Health Literacy*. Washington DC, 2010.

⁵ U.S. Congress. “H.R. 946: Plain Writing Act of 2010.” 11th Congress, 2009 – 2010. Signed into law October 13, 2010. Available at: <http://www.govtrack.us/congress/bill.xpd?bill=h111-946>.

⁶ Healthy People 2020. Federal Government website managed by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Washington DC, 2010. Available at: <http://www.healthypeople.gov/2020/default.aspx>

⁷ Healthy People 2020: Health Communication and Health Information Technology. Federal Government website managed by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Washington DC, 2010. Available at: <http://www.healthypeople.gov/2020/topicsobjectives2020/pdfs/HealthCommunication.pdf>