



Rx: Health Care FYI #36

Subject: *Improving Health Literacy*
From: *Rep. Tim Murphy (PA-18)*

The problem: Miscommunication between doctors and patients increases health care costs by 5 percent nationwide for a total of \$73 billion annually.¹ Such confusion causes unnecessary hospitalizations, delays in treatment and patients to misuse prescription drugs. Uncertainty or misunderstanding of a doctor's orders only increases the burden on families with special needs children or adults with chronic conditions, who in addition to managing multiple prescriptions, regulating diets and managing daily routines must also navigate a bureaucratic wall of insurance forms and government regulations.

What is health literacy?

- The ability to read, understand, and act on health information.²

Increased cost to the taxpayer:

- Higher costs from health illiteracy increases insurance and tax rates. A review of medical expenditures in low-literacy patients found that Medicare absorbs 39 percent of these increased costs, employers 17 percent, and Medicaid 14 percent.³

Many patients don't know they are eligible for health care:

- Many patients who are most at risk of having low health literacy—seniors, low-income individuals and the chronically ill are eligible for Medicaid and the state's Children's Health Insurance Programs (CHIP) but do not know that they are qualified for coverage.⁴ For example, in 2003 350,000 enrolled in Medicaid at a time when the U.S. Census Bureau reported 2 million became eligible. When a person who is eligible but not enrolled with Medicaid shows up at a hospital or clinic, they are typically enrolled at that time.⁵

Low health literacy can increase health care costs:

- A study of 400 Medicaid patients found that those with the lowest reading levels had medical costs almost 400 percent higher than those of patients with higher reading levels (\$12,974 versus \$2,969). In addition, these patients had more hospitalizations, fewer primary care physician visits, and poor adherence to physician recommendations.⁶

¹ Knopper S. Illiteracy: a hidden health risk. Clinician News. September 2000.

² Andrus, MR. Et. al. Health literacy: A review. Pharmacotherapy. 2002.

³ Dalton, C. Health literacy: recognition and treatment of a hidden problem. AMA policy number 160.931. March 30, 2005.

⁴ Meir, Conrad. Analysis: Politicians Using Flawed Data on Uninsured Population. The Heartland Institute. December 2004.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Communicating with patients who have limited health literacy skills: report of the National Work Group on Literacy and Health. Journal Family Practice. 1998.

- Another study of 400 asthma patients found that only 31 percent of patients with low literacy diagnosed with asthma understood that they needed to see their doctor even if they had not had an asthma attack, and only 45 percent knew that they must avoid the substances to which they are allergic, even when they were taking their medication as instructed.⁷
- A study of 3,442 clinical decisions made during 1,057 consultations between a physician and a patient, found that only 9 percent of patients understood their doctor's orders.⁸

The federal government:

- The Patient Navigator Outreach and Chronic Disease Prevention Act of 2005 (Public Law 109-18): Provides grants to recruit, assign, train, and employ patient navigators to assist chronic disease patients seeking prevention, early detection services or clinical trials to enroll in federal assistance programs.
- The Medicare Prescription Drug, Improvement, and Modernization Act (Public Law 108-173): Establishes a 1 year assessment program for reimbursement to pharmacists for medication therapy management (MTM) programs. These programs manage and monitor patients' drug therapy for chronic conditions such as diabetes, asthma, hypertension, hyperlipidemia, and congestive heart failure to ensure that seniors are taking medications to improve therapeutic benefits and reduce the risk of adverse drug reactions.

Recommendations:

- Work with health care providers and the federal government to provide incentives for improved communication between doctors and patients. E-mail and Health Information Technology (Health IT) could be used to restore the doctor/patient relationship.
- Support Electronic Prescribing to eliminate unreadable hand-written prescriptions and establish easy to understand labels and instructions for patients regarding the proper dosage, side effects and potential drug-drug or allergic reactions when taking prescription drugs.
- Work with hospitals and health care providers to establish easy-to-understand materials to distribute to patients regarding treatment instructions.
- Federally supported health care plans should create incentives for patient care management programs to improve patient compliance with doctor's orders.

⁷ Williams, M. et al. Inadequate Literacy Is a Barrier to Asthma Knowledge and Self-Care. Chest. 1998.

⁸ Braddock, C. et al. Informed Decision Making in Outpatient Practice. Journal of the American Medical Association. December 1999.