

Chapter 15

Health Literacy From a Pediatrician's Perspective: Health Literacy

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ABSTRACT

Health literacy describes individual's skills to understand and use the information on health issues, compliance to the prescribed therapeutic regimen, prevention of disease and accidents, filtering the information, and making good judgments to maintain a healthy life. Low school education and fundamental education and poverty are barriers to gain health literacy. If TV broadcasts are used optimally for training in health issues, they may reach many people. The density of the active physicians, nurses and midwives, national health coverage, and training activities of the civil associations for chronic disease contribute to health literacy. Controversy exists about the benefits and risks of social media and mass media to health literacy due to information pollution. Self-diagnosis and marketing of under-the-counter drugs are problems of the digital age. Some projects aiming to improve digital health literacy skills will help people to reach reliable health-related information. Communication skills of healthcare professionals are also important.

INTRODUCTION

It is clear that without being healthy, everything in life loses its meaning and importance. A cancer diagnosis in the family changes living or working conditions, economic status and mood of every member in the family. It may change future plans of the individual or may even cause death. A vaccine preventable infection may change a healthy child to a disabled individual. In the history, three major plague pandemics named also as 'Black Death', caused millions of deaths until cause is understood and spread is controlled. Pathogen bacteria infects small rodents (like rats, mice, and squirrels) and is transmitted to humans through the bite of an infected flea. It was a disaster in Europe, Asia and Africa. But it is

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suggested that this disaster induced the development of science and even the emergence of Renaissance. Health is the most important issue for well-being of the individuals and even nations. (Center for Disease Control and Prevention, 2019a)

For a physically and mentally healthy individual and community, in addition to preventive and clinical medicine organization of the country, health literacy is important. In this chapter main components and issues of the health literacy, preventive care and recommendations to improve health literacy in the digital age are discussed.

BACKGROUND

Since introduction of the health literacy concept in 1970's many definitions were suggested (Simonds, 1974). In 1998 World Health Organization (WHO) definition was "The cognitive and social skills which determine the motivation and ability of the individuals to gain access to understand and use information in ways which promote and maintain good health" (Nutbeam, 1998). In United States it was used to define relationship between the patient's literacy and compliance to the prescribed therapeutic regimen (Ad Hoc Committee on Health Literacy, 1999). European Union definition in 2007 was "The ability to read, filter and understand health information in order to form sound judgments" (European Commission, 2007). Australian Bureau of Statistics' definition in 2008 was "The knowledge and skills required to understand and use information relating to health issues such as drugs and alcohol, disease prevention and treatment, safety and accident prevention, first aid, emergencies, and staying healthy" (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2008). These definitions cover some important elements. a) Personal skills to understand the information b) The ability to filter and make good judgments (critical health literacy) c) To use the information to maintain a healthy life (to prevent disease, accidents, compliance to prescribed therapeutic regimen). It is important to discuss the contribution of good health literacy to a healthy life and factors effecting health literacy skills. These factors are related to individual's capacity, national health policy and organizations of the community. Health literacy study of America showed that about one thirds of the people had very low health literacy (Kutner et al, 2007). Another issue is the contents of the health information that should be given to community. As an experienced physician, the author thinks that preventive medicine has extreme importance. Information about clinical medicine can be gained when a patient developed a disease. In this setting, communication skills of the health care providers, training materials and organizations of the community will help to improve patient's skills for compliance to treatment. Poor school literacy and fundamental literacy is an obstacle for good health literacy. Printed media, mass media, TV broadcasts and internet may be used to improve health literacy but they may be also harmful by releasing unreliable information and advertising and marketing under the counter drugs.

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