Health literacy awareness and practices employed by dietitians’ in their communication with patients

Health literacy research has focused predominantly on patient outcomes, and less so on the practices of health professionals, and especially the dietitians’ role in addressing and promoting health literacy. Dietitians may be unaware of health literacy levels in their patients, and particular communication practices to address low literacy/health literacy in the patient consultation.

**Aim:** This exploratory study looks at dietitians’ awareness of health literacy, their understanding of this topic, and the practices they use to communicate health information to patients.

**Methodology:** During 2015, 10 dietitians were recruited to the study, using professional networks in London and surrounding areas. Each participant answered 28 multiple choice, or open-ended questions in recorded semi-structured interviews, on awareness of health literacy, and different communication techniques used with patients. The interviews were analysed by using the five stages of Framework Analysis, recording key statements on communication techniques and rationale for dietetic practice, for thematic discussion. Ethical approval for the study was granted on 4th June 2015, by the London Southbank University School of Health and Social Care Ethics Committee.

**Results:** Participants expressed a variable knowledge of the role of low health literacy in health outcomes, with only 2 of the 10 participants likely to reflect on, and often make changes to, their practice.

Participants with an interest in literacy levels and communication practices were more likely to reflect on, and often make changes to, their practice.

**Conclusion:**
- Increased recognition of health literacy, and its role in health outcomes, is required for dietitians
- All participants supported pre and post-registration health literacy training in universities and workplaces
- Future research should consider ‘food literacy’ with the language, terminology, and practices used specifically by dietitians
- A ‘Dietitians Guide to Improving Health Literacy’ was developed (Diagram 1) in response to participant feedback for a “handy guide”

**References:**
- Health Literacy: An Introduction. [Online] [Accessed 11 Apr 2014];
- Health literacy workshop. Royal College of General Practitioners, London;
- A. 5.2 million adults in England are ‘functionally illiterate’ (with a reading ability of an eleven-year old)
- Text-only written health information is too complex for ~43% of working-age people in England
- 61% (of 4767) English adults lacked the numeracy and literacy skills required for the interpretation of medical instructions
- People with low health literacy are less likely to enrol onto screening programmes, they experience more frequent hospital admissions, and struggle more with treatment plans, especially medication (than health literate people)

**Diagram 1.**

The Dietitians Guide to Improving Health Literacy

A person with low health literacy...

- May not attend appointments
- May not trust or believe the information given
- May not be confident in their ability to manage their health
- May not have time to ask questions
- May not be able to understand health information

Signs to look out for...

- Not engaging in the consultation
- Not asking questions
- Not making notes
- Following advice from unreliable sources

The role of the dietitian

- Provide a summary of the dietary aspects of the consultation
- Use their experience to outline effective and ineffective communication techniques, frequently using positive and negative case studies of patients to explain practices. Frequently reported changing their practice based on these experiences.

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