Paving the Way For Health Literacy: Meet Ima Littleoff

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What is Health Literacy?

- The degree to which individuals have the capacity to obtain, process, and understand basic health information and services needed to make appropriate health decisions. (Ratzan and Parker, 2000)
- A constellation of skills required to function in the healthcare environment (The American Medical Association)
- Health literacy varies by context and setting; is not correlated with education level. A low functional health literacy compromises patients' health and increases the risk of adverse outcomes

Health Literacy is not pretty.
It does not earn a paycheck or bring in revenue.
It is not at the forefront of technological advances.
It does not require new language or new research.

So how do you get anyone to pay attention?

Meet Ima Littleoff

Ima is an exciting octogenarian who, like millions of others, struggles to navigate the healthcare system.

Ima invites audience members to share in appointments with Ima’s favorite nurse practitioner. Here she helps demonstrate that effective communication is a critical aspect of safe, quality patient care.

She teaches that that creative educational methods can have positive results for engaging staff in best-practice methods.

Ima wants people understand that language access remains a matter of national importance. At the heart of her efforts, Ima wants to engage providers in great conversation about the care they provide.

Ima makes health literacy fun and interactive. She brings health literacy to life with funny antics and exaggerations. She reminds us all that communication is a real issue, and inspires us to speak clearly for the safety of our patients!

Ima’s Thoughts on Good Care

Ima agrees with the Joint Commission, and hopes that providers will improve communication by learning more about:

- Always using plain language
- Limiting information provided to two or three important points at a time
- Using drawings, models or devices to demonstrate points
- Encouraging patients to ask questions
- Actively listening to patients at every visit

Ima also recommends that all providers utilize the Teach-Back method for patient education.

Providers should ask patients to repeat-back what they know or understand, in their own words. This is not to be a test of the patient’s knowledge, but instead a test of how well you have explained a concept.

Statistically Speaking

36% of all adults in the US have limited health literacy

- 66% of U.S adults age 60 and over have inadequate or marginal literacy skills.
- 50% of welfare recipients read below fifth-grade level
- Written patient education materials average a ninth grade reading level. Current recommendations are that all education material be presented at a sixth grade reading level or below
- Studies show that patients comprehend as little as 50% of what they are told by physicians
- Up to 80% of patients forget what their doctor has said, as soon as they leave the doctor’s office.

...Which means that nearly 50% of all adults may have problems understanding prescriptions, appointment slips, informed consent documents, insurance forms and health education materials.

(NAAL, 2003)

“Hyper, hyper...tension? Oh honey, I'm not hyper! I can barely stay awake!” ~Ima

Health Literacy is the STRONGEST predictor of health status.

American Medical Association

Safety and quality preempt every advancement we make in medicine. Without good patient engagement, our medical technology will never reach its full potential.

We must engage our patients as partners, speak in common language and be sure our message is heard.

We have got to pay attention.