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by PharmaLinx LLC, Titusville, NJ
Printed in the U.S.A.
Volume Two, Number One

PharmaVoice is published eight times per year by PharmaLinx LLC, P.O.Box 327, Titusville, NJ 08560.

Postmaster: Send address changes to PharmaVoice, P.O. Box 327, Titusville, NJ 08560.

PharmaVoice Coverage and Distribution:

Domestic subscriptions are available at \$106 for one year (8 issues). Foreign subscriptions: 8 issues US\$220. Contact PharmaVoice at P.O. Box 327, Titusville, NJ 08560. Call us at 609.730.0196 or FAX your order to 609.730.0197.

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Health illiteracy in the United States has become a national epidemic. There are no specific national statistics on health literacy, but it is estimated that low health literacy skills

increase annual healthcare expenditures by \$73 billion.

According to the American Medical Association, health literacy refers to the set of skills needed to read, understand, and act on basic healthcare information.

It is estimated that more than 90 million adults with low health literacy skills have a limited ability to read and understand the instructions contained on prescriptions or labels on medicine bottles, appointment slips, informed-consent documents, insurance forms, and health educational materials: 40 million to 44 million Americans, or about one-quarter are functionally illiterate. Another 50 million U.S. citizens have marginal literacy skills. This indicates that nearly half of the adult population in our country has inadequacies in reading or computation skills.

Until relatively recently there has been a general lack of awareness about this problem within the healthcare community. The AMA with the help of pharmaceutical companies, the most proactive of which is Pfizer, is introducing initiatives to address low health literacy.

The AMA is asking physicians to address the needs of this population in the office setting; medical practitioners rarely evaluate a patient's ability to understand written information. People with low literacy are likely to hide the problem because of shame, embarrassment, or fearfulness, increasing the burden on the physician.

To gather more information about the relationship between health and literacy, the U.S. Department of Education and the AMA are working together to include questions in the National Adult Literacy Survey of 2002 on health status, health behaviors, and difficulties communicating with healthcare professionals.

The financial impact upon the healthcare industry is staggering. It is estimated that \$73 billion was spent on additional healthcare expenditures due to low health



For the more than 40 million Americans who are functionally illiterate the basic instructions on most pill bottles go unread and therefore are not acted upon.

literacy skills — an estimated \$30 billion was spent for the population that is functionally illiterate plus \$43 billion for the population that was marginally literate.

Among adults who stayed overnight in a hospital in 1994, those with low health literacy skills averaged 6% more hospital visits, and stayed in the hospital nearly two days longer than adults with higher literacy skills. Among adults with at least one doctor visit in 1994, those with low health literacy skills had on average one more doctor visit than adults with higher health literacy skills.

At the hospital level, one study found that 42% of patients who came in for care were unable to comprehend directions for taking medicine on an empty stomach; 26% could not understand information on an appointment slip; 60% could not understand a consent form.

To increase awareness of what some are calling a national health crisis, grass roots associations, the AMA, and pharmaceutical companies are beginning to address the problem of low health literacy through community-based initiatives, physician programs, and other tactics.

Taren Grom
Editor

A Valuable Lesson