Health Literacy and Health Care Quality

“You can’t have quality care unless you have health literacy woven throughout the program and the care that’s provided”

-Linda Johnston Lloyd, M.Ed., senior advisor and health literacy coordinator for the Health Resources and Services Administration.

What constitutes quality health care?

According to the Institute of Medicine’s *Crossing the Quality Chasm: A New Health System for the 21st Century* quality health care should be:

- **Safe**—avoiding injuries to patients from the care that is intended to help them.
- **Effective**—providing services based on scientific knowledge to all who could benefit and refraining from providing services to those not likely to benefit (avoiding underuse and overuse, respectively).
- **Patient-centered**—providing care that is respectful of and responsive to individual patient preferences, needs, and values and ensuring that patient values guide all clinical decisions.
- **Timely**—reducing waits and sometimes harmful delays for both those who receive and those who give care.
- **Efficient**—avoiding waste, including waste of equipment, supplies, ideas, and energy.
- **Equitable**—providing care that does not vary in quality because of personal characteristics such as gender, ethnicity, geographic location, and socioeconomic status.

In other words, quality health care is doing the **Right Thing** (evidence-based process, appropriate) for the **Right Patient**, in the **Right Way** (technical competence), at the **Right Time** (sequencing, timeliness), with the **Right Resources** (efficiency).

How do health literacy issues affect quality of care?

Miscommunication between patients and providers can lead to errors in delivery of care:

- Failure to get accurate medical histories can lead to ineffective or inappropriate care
- Failure to obtain informed consent (a violation of ethical standards of practice) can occur when a patient does not fully understand the provider
- Poor health knowledge and understanding of health conditions can result in improper self- and home-care
- Poor treatment adherence results from a patient not understanding why they have been given certain treatments or how they should follow written/oral directions from their doctor
- Medication errors commonly result from low health literacy
Individuals with low health literacy are:

- Less likely to receive preventive and other health-care services
- More likely to report lower patient satisfaction

Health literacy affects a person’s ability to effectively manage their health condition

- HIV positive individuals with low health literacy
  - Have more severe infections
  - Are less likely to take their medications
  - Are less likely to report important information to their provider
  - Are more likely to hold incorrect ideas about HIV transmission

- Diabetics with lower health literacy
  - Have poorer blood sugar control
  - Are more likely to experience eye damage than those with higher health literacy

- Asthma patients with higher reading levels were more likely to:
  - Demonstrate increased knowledge about their condition
  - Use their inhaler appropriately

- Those with low health literacy are more likely to report signs of depression

**Joint Commission recommendations**

- Make effective communications an organizational priority to protect the safety of patients
- Address patients’ communication needs across the continuum of care
- Pursue policy changes that promote improved practitioner-patient communications

**References**