

# Health literacy, its importance for citizens and patients and the involvement of medical librarians: a European initiative

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## Abstract

*Recent initiatives of the European Parliament highlight the importance of advancing health literacy in all member states. The project "Health literacy and health education fostering participation and improving women's and men's health" was developed in the framework of a Grundtvig Learning Partnership – Lifelong Learning Program, funded by the European Commission. Health literacy and health education empower patients and citizens to participate to the full in their health care and to communicate on eye level with their health professionals, making it possible to overcome disparities in health due to social causes. Librarians and information specialists are in a position to play a key role in searching, validating and disseminating health information for the general public.*

*Key words:* health literacy; health education; European Union; international cooperation.

## Introduction

As defined in the US initiative *Healthy People 2010*, *Health Literacy is the degree to which individuals have the capacity to obtain, process, and understand basic health information and services needed to make appropriate health decisions*<sup>1</sup>. Given the complexity of health systems, health literacy plays an active role in health promotion, encouraging patients to understand how to keep in a good health condition. Patients with a good level of knowledge regarding health information are able to play a key role in the implementation of patient-centered clinical research strategies, approval processes, access to treatments and treatment optimization. Healthcare is becoming increasingly patient-centred and individualized, with the patient becoming an active subject rather than a mere object of healthcare: citizens' empowerment is a key concept of this approach, as declared in the European Health strategy 2008-2013<sup>2</sup>.

Several studies have demonstrated that healthcare problems often coincide with a low health literacy level, such as: lack of knowledge of one's own health status,

reduced use of prevention services, higher rate of non-adequate healthcare, higher hospitalization rates, decreased ability to recognize and report health status and eventually lack of compliance to follow medical treatments. Nowadays, health literacy is therefore a major challenge, since a lack of understanding of the therapeutic prescription, or of the health professionals' language places the patient in a position of great distress and discomfort.

An important task of information specialists is to enable citizens and patients to become more aware of their health status. Health literacy becomes an essential tool for health promotion, since it aims to make everyone able to answer the question: "What can I do to stay healthy?"

## Partners

The project Health literacy and health education fostering participation and improving women's and men's health involved the partnership of four European countries, represented by the following organizations:

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<sup>1</sup>US Department of Health and Human Services. (2000). *Healthy People 2010*. Washington, DC: US Government Printing Office.

<sup>2</sup> Commission of the European Communities. *White Paper. Together for Health: A Strategic Approach for the EU 2008-2013*. [http://ec.europa.eu/health/ph\\_overview/Documents/strategy\\_wp\\_en.pdf](http://ec.europa.eu/health/ph_overview/Documents/strategy_wp_en.pdf)

**The Frauengesundheitszentrum – Women’s Health Center** (Graz, Austria), a non-profit non-governmental organization created to improve the condition of women and girls in all stages of life, as far as their health is concerned. It brings attention to women’s health by advocating, educating and lobbying for adequate female health structures and an equal number of men and women within health care organizations. The Centre takes into particular consideration social factors that influence health on a large scale such as education, life style, work conditions and the role of women in society.

**The Komiteen for Sundhedsoplysning – Danish Committee for Health** (Copenhagen), a non-profit non-governmental organization that works in close collaboration with public authorities such as the Ministry of Health, the National Board of Health and private organizations concerned with health. One of its main activities is developing and running health training programs, with the aim of giving people the instruments to manage their health on a day-to-day basis.

**Careum** (Zurich), an independent Swiss Foundation whose main objective is to promote education in the health care sector, providing support and inspiration for the systematic development and establishment of education and training in this area. Careum aims, in cooperation with national and international partners, to strengthen patient education for the chronically ill, making it part of a long term health care training program.

**The Istituto Superiore di Sanità – Italian National Institute of Health** (Rome), the leading technical and scientific body of the Italian National Health Service. Its activities include research, monitoring, training and counselling in the field of public health. It also serves as a major national reference point for technical and scientific information on public health issues.

### Objectives

The Learning Partnership objectives were:

- to establish contact with European adult education organizations, NGOs and public institutions experienced in health literacy;
- to discuss different approaches, strategies and policies, thus furthering health literacy awareness across European countries;
- to share skills, experiences and ideas;
- to exchange and discuss the various national-target group-specific training programs to better inform the public on health;

- to reinforce long-term partnerships and networks, in order to create a significant number of stakeholders that promote health literacy among European citizens.

### Programme of activities and methods

Between November 2011 and April 2013 four meetings on citizen’s health literacy and health education were hosted in the countries of the four members of the partnership: Austria (*Figure 1*) Denmark, Switzerland and Italy (*Figure 2*).



**Fig. 1.** Meeting held in Graz: 23-24 November 2011

Each partner was assigned the task to organize and chair one meeting in its country in order to foster the mutual exchange of experiences and skills. The hosting organization had the responsibility to collect written feedback from all participants, to produce the minutes of the hosted meeting and to publish them on a common web-based platform. The meetings were a great opportunity for all partnering countries to share their knowledge, through the presentation of national programs and tools, and the distribution of relevant



**Fig. 2.** Meeting held in Rome: 11-12 April 2013

information material. The four events were centred on strategies and policies addressing health literacy across Europe, such as training programs, health information and guidelines. The debate was focused on the status of health literacy and health education in each participating country, as well as on campaigns and activities promoted at a national level for citizen's and patient's empowerment. The presentation made by each member of the partnership was followed by a general discussion and a common evaluation.

Such a mutual cooperation gave all partners the possibility to increase their competencies on health literacy and to assess the transferability of different approaches and strategies into their own country. Furthermore, the partnership gave each organization the unique chance to illustrate its role in promoting health literacy and health education and, possibly, to become a model of good practice.

### Conclusions

The Learning Partnership was an interesting opportunity to investigate each country's approach towards the health literacy topic. The possibility of discussing quality criteria for good practice was highly appreciated.

During discussion among partners, the importance of supplying high quality health information, thus providing citizens and patients with the best evidence available, was a key issue. Exploiting social media opportunities in this field was deeply analysed, as well. The Learning Partnership offered a unique opportunity not only to improve knowledge and practice, but also to work together with patient representatives and staff of European organizations. It established connections among international experts, reinforced pre-existing contacts and created new ones among the partners. An increased awareness of the need for a common understanding of the matter in Europe, emerged as a result from the European Health Literacy Survey<sup>3</sup> findings, and from the following discussion. The participants felt encouraged in their activities at a national level. Different notions and ideas about health literacy existed within the group, and it was challenging to compare them. Meeting face to face over a period of almost two years helped to widen outlooks and reinforced the European aim to foster health literacy and education, in order to improve people's health and thus strengthen their health conditions.

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### Further reading

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