

Balancing long-term health literacy skills development with immediate action to facilitate use of reliable health information on COVID-19 in England

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Abstract

High-quality healthcare information exists for patients and the public, but a high proportion of individuals do not have the skills to access, assess and use this information. Health Education England leads the strategic development of knowledge and library services in the National Health Service (NHS) in England. One of the goals of the Knowledge for Healthcare strategy is that staff, learners, patients and the public are better equipped to use evidence-based patient, health and wellbeing information for shared decision-making and self-care. This paper outlines a partnership approach to raising awareness of health literacy, and improving the health literacy awareness and skills of NHS staff and citizens, whilst meeting immediate needs to access trustworthy information on COVID-19.

Key words: *health literacy; consumer health information; libraries, medical; COVID-19; health resources.*

The healthcare context in England

Healthcare is a knowledge business, dependent on using evidence and knowledge to inform decisions. In the United Kingdom, leadership for the National Health Service (NHS) is devolved to the each of the separate nations: Scotland, Northern Ireland, Wales and England. Health Education England (HEE) plans and commissions the education and training of current and future staff within the NHS in England (1). Strategic leadership for NHS knowledge and library services in England is also part of HEE's role (2). Across the NHS in England, healthcare is provided by complex networks of separate organisations across local communities and in hospitals. Locally, 183 NHS knowledge and library services equip NHS staff and learners with information, supported by nationally-procured digital evidence and knowledge resources. Mostly based within hospitals, these services operate increasingly across local communities (3) and provide evidence for both clinical and managerial decision-making.

Knowledge for Healthcare 2021 - 2026 was published in January 2021, the second iteration of HEE's strategy to develop NHS knowledge and library services (4). A key workstream within the strategy is to ensure that staff, learners, patients and the public are better equipped to use evidence-based patient, health and wellbeing information for shared decision-making and self-care (5).

A skills-development approach to tackling misinformation

High-quality, accurate healthcare information materials exist for the public, but a high proportion of individuals struggle to find and use them. HEE's national NHS knowledge and library services team takes a skills-development approach to building health literacy and so to tackling misinformation, enabling healthcare professionals, non-healthcare information providers and members of the public to develop the skills to access, assess and use health information. These are health literacy skills, which equip people both to find

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high-quality information and to spot and choose to disregard misinformation. In England, 43% adults aged 16-65 struggle to understand words-based health information; when numbers are added, this rises to 61% finding healthcare information hard to understand and use (6).

Health literacy awareness and techniques for NHS staff

Part of the approach is to equip local NHS knowledge and library services staff to engage with NHS staff, raising awareness of health literacy and sharing health literacy techniques to improve communication skills (7). In July 2021, the National Institute for Health and Care Excellence (NICE) issued guidelines for England and Wales on shared decision-making. These guidelines indicate that health literacy techniques should be used in conversations about decisions (8). This provides a hook for NHS knowledge and library services teams to engage with NHS staff and students on health literacy awareness and techniques.

HEE's national NHS knowledge and library services team provides a suite of training tools (Figure 1) ranging from a full train-the-trainer offer to a 1-hour training programme accredited by the Royal Society for Public Health and a 35-minute E-Learning programme developed in partnership with NHS Education for Scotland (9). These tools are shared by local NHS knowledge and library services staff with colleagues in the NHS. The E-Learning is also promoted more widely and has an average of 240 users each month.

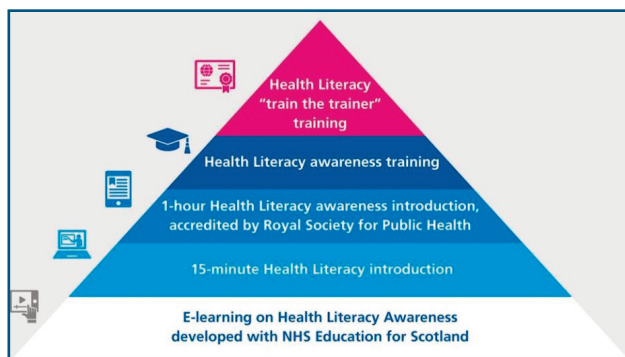


Fig. 1. Suite of health literacy training tools provided by Health Education England national NHS knowledge and library services team.

To help local NHS organisations to prioritise the geographic areas on which to focus health literacy activity,

HEE commissioned the University of Southampton to generate geodata maps of health literacy levels, based on literacy and numeracy levels in different boroughs (10). This tool enables staff working in health and care to search for a local borough, to see how health literacy levels rank nationally (Figure 2), or to identify an area on a map and compare health literacy levels locally (Figure 3).

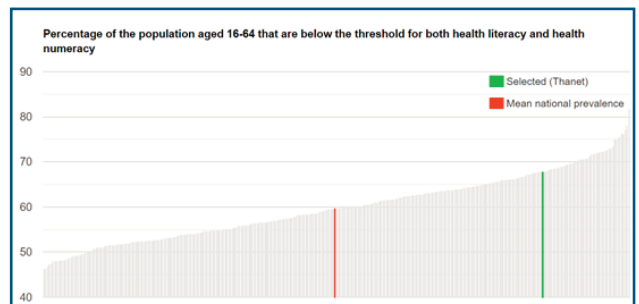


Fig. 2. National ranking by borough of the percentage of the population aged 16-64 who struggle with health information that combines words and numbers, with Thanet as example. Data from 2011 Skills for Life survey (11) with 2016 population projections (currently the most recent).

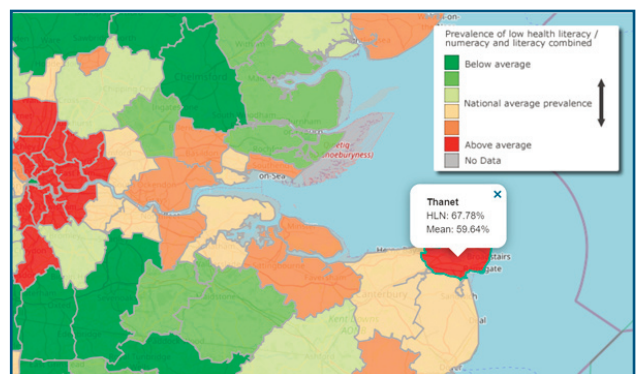


Fig. 3. Map showing ranking by borough of the percentage of the population aged 16-64 who struggle with health information that combines words and numbers. Data from 2011 Skills for Life survey (11) with 2016 population projections (currently the most recent).

Health literacy skills for citizens

Citizens need skills to identify misinformation. To address this, HEE is working with the Chartered Institute of Library and Information Professionals (CILIP), Libraries Connected (the organisation working strategically with local public libraries) and Arts Council England as core members of a National Health and

Digital Literacy Partnership. Our aim is that citizens will have the health literacy skills, the underpinning digital skills and resources to find and use trustworthy information to make shared decisions, manage their health and wellbeing and make best use of health services. The partners are joined by a range of information providers to develop resources, spread skills and to pilot these in local test sites.

Staff in libraries for the public and in education are well placed to help people develop health literacy skills, as this builds on the information literacy and digital navigation training that library staff already provide (Figure 4). Public library staff can, for example, include health examples when providing training on information literacy.

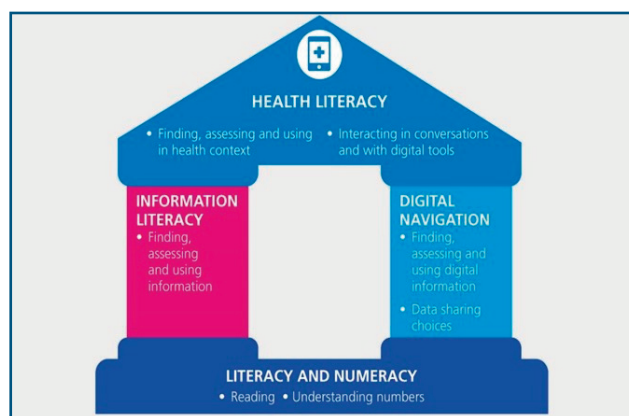


Fig. 4. Health literacy builds upon information literacy, digital navigation skills and underlying literacy and numeracy.

Working as a partnership, particularly with CILIP, the professional body, maximises opportunities to work with special interest groups in librarianship. Notably, this has created opportunities to provide training on health literacy to prison librarians, who are sharing skills with prison staff and creating resources to support prisoners.

Responding to COVID-19

With the COVID-19 pandemic, the national NHS knowledge and library services team took steps to avoid duplication and enable local NHS knowledge services to focus on local priorities (12). One initiative, introduced at pace in May 2020, was to curate reliable information resources on Coronavirus for specific patient

groups and in accessible formats, such as British Sign Language (13). There is a mandatory requirement for NHS organisations and NHS-funded social care to provide information in accessible formats (14), so health and social care staff need to be able to find trustworthy information including content in accessible formats. The team liaised with other national organisations within the NHS and identified that there was a need to bring this information together nationally in one place.

The online resource curated by HEE is a key channel to enable healthcare professionals and information providers in the community to find quality-assured, trustworthy information, in a variety of formats, that they can be confident to share with patients and carers. To save time and avoid repetition across the system, the national NHS knowledge and library services team re-prioritised the time of staff to identify authoritative sources. Working with a proactive stakeholder engagement lead within HEE to promote access to reliable Coronavirus information for health and care professionals has been invaluable. Specific promotion includes working with local authorities, who continue to provide services, notably in streets and public places, throughout the pandemic. Promotion is managed through communications teams in local NHS organisations, for links to local websites, the voluntary sector and social media, with tools including an animation (15).

The first sections developed were to meet the needs of people requiring information in accessible formats, alongside older people and children, as the groups most impacted at the start of the pandemic. New sections continue to be developed on specific conditions, Long Covid and vaccinations, in response to need and requests. As of October 2021, the site has had 154,000 page views since launch.

Learning and next steps

Alongside the long-term approach of developing underlying health literacy awareness and skills, the team recognised that in a pandemic there is also an imperative to move quickly to bring together trustworthy information sources. There is a need to maintain the Coronavirus resources in parallel with working on longer-term partnership development.

Resources in development include Easy Read tools for

the public to use to improve their conversations with healthcare staff. The national team is also working with specific healthcare professional groups who work with the public in community settings, notably pharmacists. The initiative demonstrates the value of knowledge specialists collaborating with communications professionals. The Coronavirus information site (13) was shortlisted for a national Health Service Journal award in 2020 (16).

The need to access, assess and use high-quality health information will not go away as we move out of the pandemic. We will continue to develop partnerships and share learning to increase the skills of both the NHS workforce and members of the public, so that we enable everyone to find and use high-quality health information for current and future healthcare information needs.

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