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## Health Literacy: A Natural Role for Librarians

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## Health literacy: a natural role for librarians

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## Health Literacy: A Natural Role for Librarians

### Abstract

**Purpose:** This paper serves as an introduction to the articles in the special theme issue.

**Design/methodology/approach:** This paper provides some background and context on health literacy.

**Findings:** Health literacy is a critical constellation of skills. Librarians' abilities and expertise are well suited to contributing to the improvement of health literacy for various populations in various settings. Librarians are actively engaging in a wide variety of health literacy initiatives in collaboration with other professionals and organizations.

**Practical implications:** Specific examples of how librarians are contributing to health literacy are described.

**Social implications:** Lack of health literacy is associated with poor health outcomes and increased health costs. Multiple organizations, think tanks, and government agencies have called for addressing disparities in health literacy.

**Originality/value:** This paper provides an overview and introduction to the special issue on health literacy.

**Keywords:** Health literacy, information literacy, health education, consumer health, public libraries, academic libraries, assessment, collaboration.

**Paper type:** Viewpoint

This special issue of *Reference Services Review* focuses on librarians' contributions to health literacy. A common definition of 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" (Office of Disease Prevention and Health Promotion, 2000). While availability and accuracy of health information are important, so is the accessibility and readability of that information. It is common to encounter health information that is technically correct and accurate, but is not presented in a manner that most people can understand and apply to their personal needs. The problem becomes even more acute for those with low reading levels or limited English proficiency. An IOM report advocating for health literacy noted that "[n]early half of all American adults — 90 million people — have difficulty understanding and acting upon health information" (Institute of Medicine, 2004). The dramatic growth in health information, and misinformation, on the Internet has increased the need for skills in finding and evaluating information. Healthcare providers also demonstrate a lack of health literacy skills, and are frequently ineffective in communications with patients. (Ha and Longnecker, 2010) Lack of health literacy has implications for access to healthcare; individual and caregiver participation in achieving and maintaining health; patient safety; and overall healthcare costs. The cost of low

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3 health literacy in the United States has been estimated to range from \$106 billion to \$238 billion  
4 annually (Vernon *et al.*, 2007).  
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7 While related to general reading literacy, achieving health literacy requires people at all  
8 education levels to acquire additional skills, and therefore has much in common with information  
9 literacy. Although most librarians are not healthcare experts, their expertise is highly applicable  
10 to improving health literacy. The U.S. Office of Disease Prevention and Health Promotion  
11 describes several key strategies for promoting health literacy: improve the usability of health  
12 information and health services; build knowledge to improve health decision making, and  
13 advocate for health literacy (Office of Disease Prevention and Health Promotion, 2008). Remove  
14 the word “health” from these strategies and it becomes apparent that these are all activities  
15 practiced by librarians on a daily basis.  
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18 The articles in this issue provide practical examples of health literacy initiatives and  
19 collaborations undertaken by librarians in academic, health sciences, and public library settings.  
20 In addition, the authors provide further illumination of the meaning of the term “health literacy”,  
21 discuss ways in which librarians in various types of libraries can teach and promote health  
22 literacy, and challenge all librarians to extend and improve these efforts.  
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25 Two of the articles help provide context for librarians’ contributions to health literacy. In  
26 “Health literacy and libraries: a literature review”, Barr-Walker finds that as far back as 2001  
27 public and academic librarians have been actively collaborating to promote health literacy among  
28 a wide variety of populations, including older adults, underinsured people, immigrants, inmates,  
29 health professionals and students. Barr-Walker also identifies gaps in the literature, suggesting  
30 opportunities for future work, and calls for more rigorous assessment. In “Health literacy and  
31 information literacy: a concept comparison”, Lawless, Toronto, and Grammatica discuss the  
32 complexity of defining “health literacy” and compare and contrast it with definitions of  
33 “information literacy” with which librarians may be more familiar. The article includes a helpful  
34 history of the use of both terms, and a discussion of the terms in the context of various controlled  
35 vocabularies, including LCSH and MeSH. Understanding the origins and meaning of “health  
36 literacy” in the context of health disciplines can help librarians more effectively communicate  
37 and collaborate with healthcare professionals.  
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42 Assessments in public library service contexts are addressed in two articles. In “Health  
43 information: print materials assessment in public libraries”, Flaherty and Kaplan issue a call to  
44 action for public libraries to ensure their health related print collections are up-to-date, unbiased,  
45 and trustworthy, and to develop collection policies for health materials that consider the special  
46 role such sources play in supporting healthy communities. The article references multiple  
47 sources that librarians can use to improve their skills and resource selections for providing health  
48 information. In “Hispanics and public libraries: assessing their health information seeking  
49 behaviors in the e-health environment”, Yoo-Lee, Rhodes, and Peterson describe a small study of  
50 Hispanic immigrants’ health information seeking behavior. They found that while use of the  
51 Internet was high among the respondents, use of public libraries was low. The article discusses  
52 Hispanics’ use of the Internet for finding health information, disparities in availability of quality  
53 health information for limited English proficiency readers, and the various barriers to public  
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3 library use that may affect immigrant populations. The authors provide suggestions for library  
4 outreach to potentially underserved immigrant populations.  
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7 While collaboration is a common theme throughout the special issue, collaborative efforts are  
8 particularly evident in two articles. In “Improving health literacy: health sciences library case  
9 studies”, Shipman, Lake and Weber provide multiple examples of various partnerships the  
10 librarians at University of Utah have engaged in to promote improved health in their patients,  
11 employees and community members. Training programs, research and advocacy efforts are  
12 described. While the initiatives described involved medical librarians, the examples are also  
13 relevant to librarians working in other settings. In “A librarian's role in media effects health  
14 literacy”, Kavanaugh, Lavalley, and Rudd describe an emerging role as “health information  
15 literacy expert” for a librarian embedded in the Center on Media and Child Health at Harvard.  
16 The authors describe the uses and limitations of several tools available for assessing readability  
17 of health information, including the creatively named “Simple Measure of Gobbledygook”. Also  
18 described is an online “Clinician Toolkit”, which provides resources for addressing teen media  
19 use during healthcare visits.  
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23 Several articles address instruction for healthcare professionals or health professions students,  
24 reinforcing the fact that health literacy is not automatically achieved through higher levels of  
25 general or specialized education. By educating current and future providers in effective  
26 information literacy, librarians may have an indirect impact on the quality of care of patients. In  
27 “A conceptual approach to practitioners’ health information literacy”, Hallyburton examines the  
28 health literacy and information biases of healthcare practitioners, including confirmation bias,  
29 navigational bias, and cultural bias. Combining theories of both general and professional  
30 information seeking behaviors, the author recommends incorporating instruction into an  
31 evidence-based practice framework already familiar to healthcare practitioners, and summarizes  
32 techniques for doing so. In “Promoting health literacy within a graduate-level nutrition  
33 curriculum”, Beyer and Thomson describe a week-long educational module taught by a librarian  
34 as part of an online health information literacy course for graduate-level allied health students.  
35 Discussion and assignments promote an understanding of what “health literacy” means,  
36 appreciation for the patients’ perspectives, and critical appraisal of consumer health websites. In  
37 “Health literacy education: the impact of synchronous instruction”, Lantzy provides a  
38 comparative assessment of one-shot sessions that are taught to undergraduate students by  
39 librarians using either in-person or online synchronous techniques. The findings support the  
40 efficacy of online instruction for health literacy, which provides the potential to reach more  
41 people.  
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47 Today people face increasingly complex choices about health and lifestyle, healthcare  
48 treatments, and how to pay for healthcare. Although more health-related information is available  
49 to a wider audience than ever before, navigating and evaluating it does not come easily. The  
50 need for trusted, reliable guidance in learning to navigate and evaluate this information will only  
51 increase. Healthcare professionals need skills to more effectively communicate with patients  
52 from diverse backgrounds. Organizations and institutions need to develop print and online  
53 materials that are clear and understandable. The articles in this issue provide many useful  
54 examples of roles for librarians in improving health literacy throughout the communities they  
55 serve. It is hoped that these articles provide examples of services that librarians can emulate, and  
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3 that librarians working in all settings will be inspired to develop new and innovative services and  
4 to publish and share their ideas.  
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