Navigating Health Literacy Challenges
Tailoring patient education to improve health outcomes
Each patient’s unique and ever-evolving health literacy has a direct impact on their care journey. Patients need to understand information provided to them in order to actively participate in their health care decision making and care plan adherence. Ensuring that patients are receiving the right content, at the right time, at the right health literacy level, at every stage of the patient journey, is essential.

At Elsevier, we know improved health literacy is directly tied to improved health outcomes. Hospitals and health systems can ensure more effective patient education by assessing patients’ health literacy and selecting appropriate educational materials and formats for their specific health literacy levels. By personalizing the patient experience with materials catered toward their health literacy levels, patients and clinicians are better able to communicate with one another and engage in care decisions. Ultimately, this helps reduce costly variations in care, promote better outcomes, and ensure consistency of care for a more satisfying patient experience.
Meet the experts

To discover more about the importance of health literacy and why delivering the right content in the right format to patients matters, we asked a panel of experts to share their thoughts.

Pamela Abner, Mount Sinai Health System

“The most basic definition of Health Literacy is the ability to obtain, process and use health information. Without health literacy, patients cannot make informed decisions and might not even understand what they’re doing, potentially compromising their ability to perform basic wellness and preventative care.”

Monique McCollum, University of Colorado Hospital

“Communication is the top concern when it comes to assessing health literacy and educating patients, and frequently, it is rushed. We need to slow down, make a connection, and take the time to ensure patients understand what is being communicated. Reassure the patient that it’s okay if they don’t understand and encourage them to ask questions.”

Lynn Charbonneau, Tampa General Hospital

“Health literacy and outcomes are directly tied. If patients are aware of their health conditions and understand their care plans, there is a greater likelihood they will adhere to them, improving outcomes.”
Meet the experts

**Pamela Abner | Mount Sinai Health System**
Pamela Abner, MPA, CPXP, is Vice President and Chief Administrative Officer of the Office for Diversity and Inclusion at Mount Sinai Health System. Ms. Abner has more than twenty years of comprehensive senior human resources experience in a multi-site health care system overseeing and leading benefits, pension, recruitment, compensation employee relations, human resource systems and diversity management.

**Monique McCollum | University of Colorado Hospital**
Monique McCollum, RN, MPH, CPHQ, MCHES®, is Co-Chair of the Patient & Family Advisory Council, Office of Patient Experience at the University of Colorado Hospital. During her almost 11 years as UCH she has always worked in patient education and health literacy. She is a certified professional in healthcare quality and is a master-level certified health education specialist. She has also received a certification in health literacy from the University of Missouri.

**Lynn Charbonneau | Tampa General Hospital**
Lynn Charbonneau, MBA, CPXP, is Manager of Patient Relations & Guest Services at Tampa General Hospital. Ms. Charbonneau works with organizations on best practices to improve their staff and physician engagement which improves their patients’ experiences. She helps organizations align their strategic direction and performance management systems to create a cultural framework to build talent that insures that the goals of the organization are realized.
Q: What are some of the dangers related to assuming the level of a patient’s health literacy?

Pamela Abner
A: By assuming a patient’s health literacy level, the biggest risk involves the patient not understanding what is being communicated. When this occurs, it can significantly impact the patient’s health outcomes. It is important to assess what they understand by asking them to recite back the information. Then, take time to ensure the patient is oriented, so they receive the right care.

Lynn Charbonneau
A: When clinicians assume a patient’s health literacy level, they’re also assuming the patient understands everything that’s being shared. This is concerning particularly for aging patients who might have difficulty hearing. While providers don’t do this intentionally, it happens. Providers need to assess patients for health literacy and recognize patients may need someone there to assist them.

Monique McCollum
A: The biggest concern providers face when assuming a patient’s health literacy level is the potential for poor outcomes. Providers should not assume patients or caregivers understand because they don’t ask questions. This often isn’t the case. Sometimes they’re embarrassed they don’t understand and will avoid asking questions.
Tailoring materials to a patient’s health literacy level is crucial as research shows.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>% of Information</th>
<th>1/2 of Adults</th>
<th>Higher Hospitalization</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Immediately Forgotten by Adult Learners</td>
<td>Have Trouble Understanding and Using Health Information</td>
<td>Rates and Use of Emergency Services are Directly Correlated to Limited Health Literacy</td>
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“Providers have to be sensitive to everyone’s ability to understand. It’s essential to look at every patient as an individual and avoid making assumptions.” - Lynn Charbonneau

— Lynn Charbonneau
Q: How are caregiver expectations of the aging patient population – and all populations – changing?

Monique McCollum
A: Patients and families expect the transparency that comes with today’s electronic health records, patient portals and other technology, and providers are increasingly relying on these tools for communication, education and engagement. Patients, particularly those who are elderly or less tech-savvy, may need help to understand information and navigate the technology where education and other critical information may be accessed.

Lynn Charbonneau
A: We cannot make assumptions based on age or any other factor regarding which patients are tech-savvy and which are not. My father could use a cell phone, but my mother could not. Providers need to be sensitive to varying abilities and tailor how they deliver information to meet each patient’s individual needs.

Pamela Abner
A: Communication with patients and their caregivers needs to be very effective. It is extremely important providers are aware of various backgrounds and language proficiencies, seeking help from caregivers or others when needed. Sometimes unknown language barriers or unexpected accents can be misinterpreted as a cognitive condition, such as dementia. Understanding health literacy requires the provider to consider all aspects of the patient.
Age impacts health literacy

LOW
HEALTH LITERACY IS MOST LIKELY EXPERIENCED AMONG OLDER ADULTS.¹

70%
OF PATIENTS OVER 75 HAVE BASIC OR BELOW BASIC HEALTH LITERACY.²

MORE THAN 3/4
OF PATIENTS 50 AND OVER HAVE LEFT FEELING CONFUSED ABOUT THE NEXT STEPS OF THEIR CARE PLAN.³

“Providers should treat each patient as an individual and avoid initially forming any preconceived notions of their abilities or understanding. This means starting anew with each encounter, focusing on the best way to communicate, and tailoring the relationship to that individual and his or her caregivers.”

— Pamela Abner

Q: What effective strategies do you use for promoting health literacy throughout all stages of the patient journey?

Monique McCollum
A: All communication should be clear, concise and in plain language. Discharge teaching should start at the beginning of the visit rather than trying to truncate it into the last 10–15 minutes before discharge. Providers also should strive to create a relationship with caregivers to ensure they understand their roles and that they promote a shame-free, teach-back environment to assess understanding and encourage questions.

Pamela Abner
A: With any patient, it's important to assess cognitively what patients understand, ensure they are oriented and then receive the care they need. We have implemented the Care and Respect for Elderly and Emergencies (CARE) volunteer program, where volunteers are trained to work with these different patient populations to help with reading, reduce anxiety, promote companionship, help them walk, and keep them engaged.
Agency for Healthcare Research and Quality’s Health Literacy Universal Precautions

“Regardless of how educated an individual may be, the stress of the situation can affect how much is heard, retained, understood, and recalled later. Providers should follow the Agency for Healthcare Research and Quality’s Health Literacy Universal Precautions to assess every patient’s health literacy.”
— Monique McCollum

These are the steps that practices take when they assume that all patients may have difficulty comprehending health information and accessing health services. Precautions are aimed at:

- **Simplifying Communication and Confirming Patient Comprehension**
- **Creating an Easier Health Care System Navigate**
- **Supporting Patients’ Efforts to Improve Their Health**

Q: How can improving health literacy improve health outcomes for patients?

Pamela Abner
A: Providers should avoid making assumptions about what patients and their caregivers will do when they get home. It is important to confirm specific steps in their care plan can be followed, such as filling prescriptions, following specific diets, and getting to follow up appointments. These and other aspects of the care plan fall under the umbrella of health literacy and can significantly impact outcomes.

Monique McCollum
A: Patients cannot make informed decisions if they don’t understand information provided to them. This compromises their ability to perform basic wellness and preventative care. When patients are empowered to ask questions and understand, they can participate in their health and improve their own outcomes.

Lynn Charbonneau
A: When my father was ill, he was on multiple medications. We created a simple medication board out of cardboard and markers, and physically taped the different pills to the board so he could easily follow and understand his medication regime. This visual worked for him because he could relate to it. It enabled him to adhere to his medication regime even when I wasn’t around to help him.
Health literacy and outcomes are directly related.

Patients with higher levels of health literacy:

- Are more likely to use preventative measures such as mammograms, Pap smears, and flu shots
- Are less likely to have chronic conditions
- Have lower rates of hospitalization and use of emergency services

“Health literacy and outcomes are directly tied. If patients are aware of their health conditions and understand their care plans, there is a greater likelihood they will adhere to them, improving outcomes.”

— Pamela Abner
Q: How have video or other interactive materials improved the ability to create engagement with patient health information?

Lynn Charbonneau
A: Interactive materials can be extremely effective for patients to leverage, as it allows them to view materials in a wide variety of formats and timeframes, making it more digestible for the patient. By giving patients the option to see information in different formats, they are able to choose the ones that best fit their own learning style. When patients have the opportunity to review education in the comfort of their own home, we've found they understand more and become a more active, engaged participant in their health.

Monique McCollum
A: The more senses you can engage in education, the more likely patients are to understand and retain information. Not every patient learns the same way, so interactive materials give patients the ability to have exposure to various education formats, eliminating the one-size-fits-all approach that many providers take. As providers, we need to re-engage with patients to talk about it, teach-back, and make sure they understand.
Video helps providers educate patients through a more interactive approach

“Many patients are visual learners, so video presents another opportunity for patient education.”
— Lynn Charbonneau

- Engages patients using multiple senses, making the information easier to remember and retain
- Works best for visual learners
- Allows patient to review material multiple times, in the comfort of their home
Learn how Elsevier engages, educates and empowers patients throughout their healthcare journeys. Visit elsevier.com/patient-experience.