

health literacy in marginalized communities

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the policy problem:
Health literacy describes the degree to which individuals are able to understand, obtain, and process basic information about their health in order to make the most appropriate and effective health decisions. Low levels of health literacy disproportionately affect impoverished and marginalized communities more than any other population.



In what ways do low levels of health literacy directly affect marginalized communities throughout the world?

Certain groups of individuals that are more predisposed to having particular health complications as a result of certain risk factors require a higher need for health-related information and assistance. In 2004, researchers at the Institute of Medicine asserted that certain social risk factors, such as one's "socioeconomic position, residential and community context," have a potential causal relationship with levels of health literacy and the reasons for its possible deficits. Low levels of health literacy disproportionately affect particular disadvantaged populations and represents a barrier to ultimately improving health outcomes in those populations. As a result of complex medical jargon used by most medical practitioners, failed attempts at navigating the convoluted health care system, or socioeconomic obstacles to understanding novel healthcare concepts, low levels of health literacy continue to plague many communities.

groups that are affected:
impoverished communities.
poorly educated communities.
the elderly.
chronic disease sufferers.
communities with a native language other than English.





THE IMPACT OF HEALTH LITERACY

Compared to individuals with proficient health literacy, adults with low levels of health literacy experience:

4x
higher health costs

6%
more hospital visits

2 day-
longer hospital stays



It is estimated that about 90 million Americans have low health literacy today.

More than
1/3



of adults are in the "basic" or "below basic" health literacy groups (more susceptible to failing to properly read and understand warnings on prescription medicine labels).

A STUDY IN ENGLAND CONCLUDED THAT IN A STUDY OF 7,857 PATIENTS:



adults with low health literacy, with scores in the lowest 12.5%, were more than twice as likely to pass away within 5 years.



Why is Health Literacy Important?
People make choices about their health every day when they decide what to eat, when to see a doctor, whether or not to exercise, and knowing how to understand the complicated information that goes along with navigating the healthcare system is critical. The consequences of low health literacy are felt by:

- communities struggling to gain access to quality healthcare
- healthcare systems unable to deliver effective services
- insurers, governments, and patients facing higher costs.

What are some ways to address low health literacy?
There are many ways to address low health literacy that have varying levels of effectiveness for the broader societal structures like the healthcare system, educational institutions, and the patient communities. Interventions in the health system could include:

- making print and electronic health information more accessible and easier to comprehend.
- providing education to improve low levels of health literacy and empower disadvantaged communities.
- reforming the healthcare system to make it more patient-centered.



My Policy Recommendation:
An effect policy that shows a lot of promise is a more community-based and cost-effect approach that is outlined in a study done in the Journal of the Medical Library Association. Researchers focused on exploring the potential of a community-based health information outreach project in order to overcome the problems associated with health literacy in low-income Hispanic communities along the Texas-Mexico border. They utilized a team of individuals dedicated to health information outreach, called "promotoras," in order to search English and Spanish versions of MedlinePlus and facilitate discourse on providing helpful information to patients in the area.

Based on the residents and the work of the "promotoras," there was an increased interest in the use of MedlinePlus in the outreach communities for this project, and it resulted in 6 themes that emerged from the analysis of these experiences (listed in descending frequency).



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