



Sue Ann Says: Learn about Health Literacy this Year!

For most of us, our new year's resolutions are related to improving our health: exercising, dieting, seeing our doctor regularly. However well-intentioned, we often fall short. Many of us don't fully understand the doctor's orders. Or maybe we don't know how to take a new prescription, interpret our child's vaccination schedule, measure a serving size of meat, or decipher nutrition labels at the grocery store.

You might not have heard the term "health literacy," but it's a hot medical topic both in Wisconsin and across the country. Health literacy is the ability to obtain, understand and act on basic health information and services so we can make appropriate healthcare decisions. It includes the ability to understand charts and graphs, use computers, gauge credibility of information and communicate symptoms effectively. As patients are increasingly asked to educate themselves and take charge of their healthcare – and as medical technology gets ever more complicated – we need even greater health literacy skills.

"Most people need some help understanding healthcare information, regardless of their literacy level," Michele Erikson told me. Michele is executive director of Wisconsin Literacy, a coalition of adult, family and workplace literacy providers working to improve literacy across Wisconsin. "But without basic reading, writing and language skills, it is extremely difficult to understand and make informed health decisions. These people are at serious health risk."

Astonishingly, research shows that 93 million Americans – almost half the population – read at or below the basic literacy level. At this level of literacy, people have a hard time interpreting a bus schedule let alone an immunization or growth chart, a prescription label or warnings about drug interactions.

"About 20 percent of our population reads at or below a fifth grade level – but most medical materials are written at the tenth grade level," Michele said. "This tremendous disconnect between our healthcare information system and the general population has major treatment consequences."

It's not surprising then that literacy level is a stronger predictor of one's health status than age, income, employment status, educational level or ethnic group. Nor is it surprising that annual healthcare costs for people with the lowest literacy skills are four times higher

than those with higher literacy skills. That makes literacy not just an educational issue, but a critical public health and economic issue.

According to a report released in October 2007 from the University of Connecticut, the cost of low health literacy ranges from \$103 billion to \$236 billion on the U.S. economy each year. Why is this?

People with lower health literacy know and understand less about their health and how to manage chronic disease. For lack of information, they often don't recognize early signs of illness. They are more likely to miss out on effective treatment or incorporate crucial lifestyle changes that can improve their health. They don't understand the importance of – and often lack access to – preventive healthcare. Consequently, they more often end up in the ER or are hospitalized for a disease that could have been treated more effectively – and less expensively – in a doctor's office or prevented altogether.

We must take action to improve health literacy in Wisconsin. First, we need to raise awareness of health literacy, and literacy in general. Write to your local media encouraging them to cover stories on literacy. Learn more about Wisconsin Literacy's classes and services so you can refer people who might need to boost their skills, or volunteer as a tutor for an adult literacy program. (Visit their Web site at www.wisconsinliteracy.org.)

For better healthcare, take a list of questions with you to the doctor's office. Write down what the doctor says. If you don't understand something, ask. And consider taking a family member or friend with you. When people don't feel well or are taking medications, they may not be thinking clearly. Older people often can't hear the doctor. People who do not speak English as a first language may have an especially difficult time understanding medical jargon. (Most medical centers provide translators who can help patients interpret both oral and written language. Let the doctor's office know in advance so they can schedule a translator.)

“It's so important to have someone else with you at the doctor's appointment to help remember and interpret the information,” Michele notes. “After all, two brains are better than one.”

As we begin another year and we recommit to improving our health and well-being, remember that good health is based on the knowledge we need to take care of ourselves and our families. Try to spread that knowledge this year because it all begins with a healthy woman.

Yours in good health,

Sue Ann Thompson
Founder & President
Wisconsin Women's Health Foundation

The Wisconsin Women's Health Foundation is a statewide not-for-profit organization that presents women's health education and outreach programs, funds women's health research, and provides scholarships for women in academic medicine. Your donations help the Foundation reach women all over Wisconsin with the information, resources and tools they need to be healthy. To make a donation or to learn more about the Foundation visit www.wwhf.org or call 1-800-448-5148.