

# McLean, Koehler, Sparks & Hammond

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## Physician Services

### Are you doing all you can to help patients be health literate?

When a patient fails to comply with a treatment plan, it doesn't always mean stubborn refusal.

Sometimes, the patient simply doesn't understand a diagnosis, medical terminology or the complicated steps involved in the treatment plan laid out by the physician.

Ask a question to ensure the patient understood your instructions.

And at times, it's the complex nature of the payment and payer approval system that stalls a patient's action.

Health literacy is a huge hurdle for American patients. But many healthcare providers hear the term "health literacy" and automatically assume an inability to read.

That's not necessarily true, says Helen Osborne, M.Ed., OTR/L, president of Health Literacy Consulting in Natick, Mass., and author of Health Literacy from A to Z.

"When I talk about health literacy, I talk about six reasons people struggle to understand, and struggling to read is just one of them. So I really like to make the point that literacy and health literacy are not synonyms," Osborne says.



Inability to read may be a large factor in your patients' failure to understand practice communications, such as pre-procedure instructions.

But it's more likely that other issues, such as stress and emotions, are at play.

Most patients already feel intimidated in healthcare settings. When fear of a potentially life-threatening diagnosis weighs in, their understanding of verbal or written instructions decreases substantially.

"It doesn't matter how smart we are and how much we already know," says Osborne. "When we're scared, sick and overwhelmed, nothing can go through, at least for a while."

Physicians also should consider age, cultural and disability factors. And one of the toughest hurdles in health care is the choice of words used.

Kristina Anderson of EasyRead Copywriting in Albuquerque, N.M., helps healthcare providers write in plain language.

"A person's literacy level can drop four levels when dealing with subjects not familiar to them," Anderson says.

And in health care, patients also have to understand and navigate a complex delivery and payment system, one often communicated solely by printed or Internet-based forms.

Research has shown that there are three types of health literacy:

1. Prose – continuous text, such as in a patient brochure
2. Quantitative – numbers-based information
3. Document – forms, charts, maps and graphs

“People have much more difficulty with quantitative and document literacy,” Osborne says.

It's a good idea to look at the handouts and forms you use in your practice – even the maps that provide directions – and assess how easy they are to follow. Experts such as Osborne and Anderson can help, and software programs have been designed to assess reading level.

But Osborne is not a big fan of word processing assessment tools.

“The gold standard of knowing if something is usable and readable is to ask your patients. They're your experts on what's readable,” she says.

You don't have to spend a lot of money to evaluate and revamp your written communication. Consider holding an informal survey or focus group to test your print materials.

And to improve health literacy among your patients, don't focus solely on the printed word. Osborne, who is a licensed occupational therapist, says providers need to communicate in a variety of ways.

“Often we think just because we hand something out that's written, it's been communicated,” Osborne says.

Patients may look as if they understand, Anderson says, so the teach-back method helps.

“Try not to be patronizing, but ask a question to ensure the patient understood your instructions,” says Anderson.

For example, ask, “Can you tell me how you will care for your wound next week so I can be sure I've explained it correctly and haven't left anything out?”

Don't assume that some patients need plain language more than others. Begin making it a regular practice to communicate effectively with all patients on a basic level, free of jargon and run-on concepts.

“I recommend that we make a commitment to communicate clearly and simply with almost everybody and then provide ways they can learn more,” says Osborne.

Osborne and Anderson provide additional information and links on their Web sites at [www.healthliteracy.com](http://www.healthliteracy.com) and [www.easyreadcopywriting.com](http://www.easyreadcopywriting.com).

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