

# Knowledge and Perceptions of Health Literacy Among Nursing Professionals

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## 1 Background

Limited health literacy affects the ability of nearly half of the US population to adequately read, comprehend and act on medical information and interact with the health care system. Studies reveal that health care professionals may not recognize limited health literacy in their patients nor understand its impact on their patients' health outcomes. No study to date has exclusively explored what registered nurses (RNs), including advanced practice nurses (APRNs), know about health literacy.

The specific aims of the study are:

1. To describe nursing professionals' knowledge and perceptions of the impact of limited health literacy on individual patients, their practice and the health system.
2. To survey self-reported communication techniques used by nursing professionals to facilitate the care of individuals with limited health literacy.
3. To examine nursing professionals' perceptions of effectiveness of or barriers to implementation of health literacy provider and staff education at their place of practice.
4. To explore nursing professionals' perceptions of effectiveness of or barriers to implementation of health literacy programs for patients at their place of practice.

## 2 Methods

- ❖ Cross-sectional, descriptive study
- ❖ Utilized a web-based survey to assess the current knowledge and perceptions of health literacy among nursing professionals.
- ❖ Potential participants were RNs and APRNs licensed by the State of California
- ❖ Post cards and emails with the survey link were sent to licensed RNs and APRNs who were randomly selected from a publicly available database from the California Board of Registered Nursing.
- ❖ Participants' knowledge and perceptions of health literacy were measured by the Nursing Professional Health Literacy Survey (NPHLS), a 47 item, web-based survey developed by the investigators for this study from the questionnaires used in previous investigations of professional awareness of health literacy.<sup>1,2</sup>
- ❖ Data analysis included descriptive statistics to describe nursing professionals' general knowledge of health literacy, their self-reported use of communication techniques and their perceptions of effectiveness of and/or barriers to implementation of health literacy provider and staff education at their place of practice.

## 3 Results

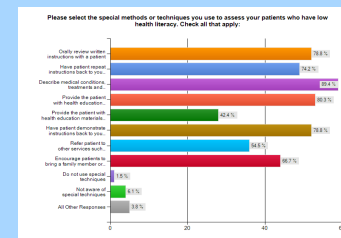
Participants (n=76) were mostly White (60%), working as a RN Staff nurse (47%), Nurse Practitioner (NP) (33%), Clinical Nurse Specialist (CNS) (9%), or RN Manager (8%). Sixty percent work full time and 31% of them have worked as a nurse >20 years. Most participants work in acute care settings (59%), primarily with adult (52%) and geriatric (21%) patients. A majority of participants held advanced nursing degrees (Masters or PhD) (60%) with 51% of the NP and CNS being nationally board certified and 41% of the RNs certified in their specialty.

## Results

### Knowledge and Perceptions of Nurses

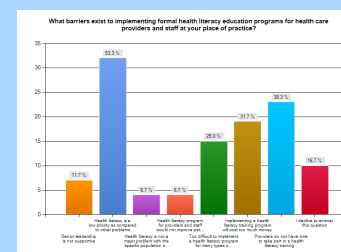
- 80% have heard of the term "health literacy" (HL) and 75% report they know a moderate amount to great deal about HL
- However, 59% have **never** received any formal training on HL
- Many reported educational level (99%), socioeconomic status (96%), race/ethnicity (79%) as the main factors associated with HL
- 48% perceived that low HL greatly interfered with patients' ability to understand health information, 38% perceived it interfered with patients' ability to obtain appropriate health services, and 45% perceived it interfered with patients' ability to follow through on recommended treatments
- 39% of nurses **never** ask the patient for the last grade completed
- 65% reported they ask patients to repeat instructions back to them either often or always and 77% reported that they ask patients if they understand instructions or have any questions
- Only 30% reported they ask patients if they have difficulty reading medical information or completing medical forms
- More than 80% report they never or rarely **formally** assess HL with a validated questionnaire; instead 60% reported they use their "**gut feeling**" to assess a patient's level of HL
- 56% report that low HL is viewed as a **low priority** compared to other patient problems

### Techniques and Training



- Only 42% of nursing professionals provide patients with educational materials designed for low HL
- Nearly 72% "did not know" or responded "no" when asked if their practice site had a HL intervention program in place

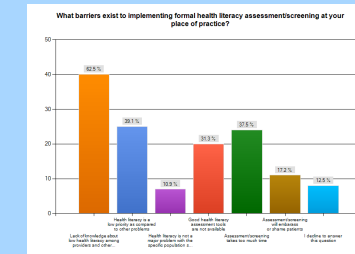
### Barriers to Health Literacy Education



- 53% of nursing professionals reported that HL is a low priority, thus creating barriers to implementing formal HL education programs

## Results, continued

### Barriers to Health Literacy Assessments



- 63% of nursing professionals reported lack of knowledge about low HL among providers as a major barrier in implementing formal HL assessments

## 4 Conclusions

- ❖ The role of nursing in direct patient care and in the delivery and management of health services is important
  - ❖ Nurses' knowledge about health literacy may be directly related to the quality and safety of care that patients receive
  - ❖ Knowledge and understanding of what nursing professionals currently know about health literacy remains lacking
- This pilot study reveals that:
- ❖ Nurses have a limited understanding of the concept of health literacy
  - ❖ Nurses have a limited understanding on the role low health literacy plays in patient health outcomes
  - ❖ Nurses' understanding of what it takes to get a patient to act on health information is limited
  - ❖ Reliance on easy to read materials and "teach back method" may not be the most effective method for patients in increasing patient activation

## 5 Future Directions

- ❖ Health care systems need to facilitate and support continuing education regarding HL for nurses
- ❖ Nursing educators must place a greater emphasis on HL in nursing curriculum
- ❖ Future research should address testing educational strategies for nurses and how increasing knowledge and understanding can improve health outcomes

## 6 References

1. Jukkala, A., Dupree, J. P., & Graham, S. (2009). Knowledge of limited health literacy at an academic health center. *The Journal of Continuing Education in Nursing*, 40(7), 295-302
2. Schlichting, J. A., Quinn, M. T., Heuer, L. J., Schaefer, C. T., Doshi, M. L., & Chari, M. H. (2007). Provider perceptions of limited health literacy in community health centers. *Patient Education & Counseling*, 69(1-3), 114-120