Using images to enhance patient education

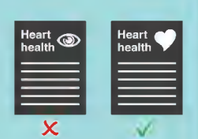
Kristin Foster, BAA | Graphic Artist, Patient & Family Education Program,
kristin.foster@uhn.ca | University Health Network, Toronto, Ontario, Canada

Introduction

The Patient & Family Education Program at the University Health Network (UHN) ensures patients and families have the right information at the right time. Patients in our acute care, cancer care and rehab settings need reliable information that is easy to understand; and one approach that we use to address this need is the use of images. Research shows that using images to enhance oral and written instructions increases attention, comprehension, recall and adherence. However, images that are used incorrectly or in the wrong context are not as effective.

To achieve the best results:

- Images must match the accompanying text. If the image and content are not directly related, it can be confusing and distracting to patients.



- Images should be simple and direct. If they are too complex then the meaning may be lost.

- Images must be relevant and culturally appropriate. For example, illustrations depicting seniors as frail and unhappy are not appreciated by our senior audience. To address issues of gender, we avoid depicting very feminine or very masculine figures for illustrations in which sex is not important.

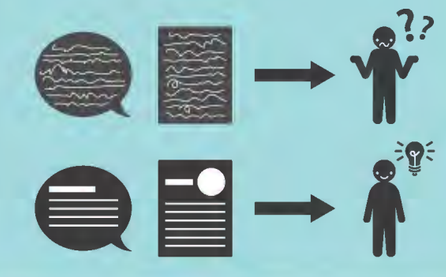
The UHN Patient & Family Education graphic artist works with healthcare providers across the hospital to create images that address the needs of different patient populations. Through this collaborative process we address communication barriers associated with low health literacy.

Impact

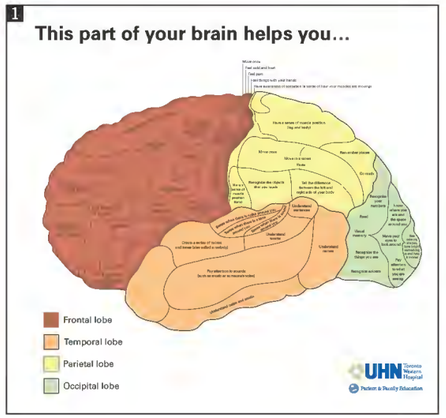
Each image can have a different educational impact, depending on how it is used and where the patient is along the continuum of care. Since the images are created in-house, the copyright is retained and the images can be reused or modified for different applications. Whether it is in-hospital teaching or a take-home handout, the effective use of images in conjunction with plain language helps patients and their families to be partners in their care. The following examples on the right show how the images created at UHN have impacted our patients.

Next steps

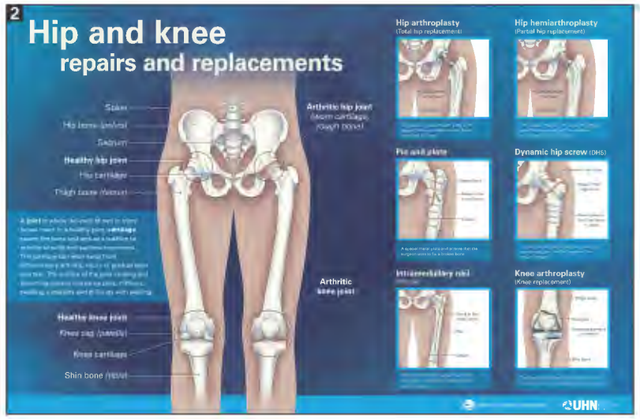
The Patient & Family Education Program is in the process of implementing a patient education resource policy. Once approved, any clinician wishing to create resources for patients will be required to consider the visual component of learning when developing resources for patients. The policy will identify as best practice the combined use of plain language and visuals to address issues related to low health literacy. In addition, we will maintain standards of accessibility in design. We will ensure we are meeting the needs of as many patients as possible and giving them the skills to be involved in their care.



1



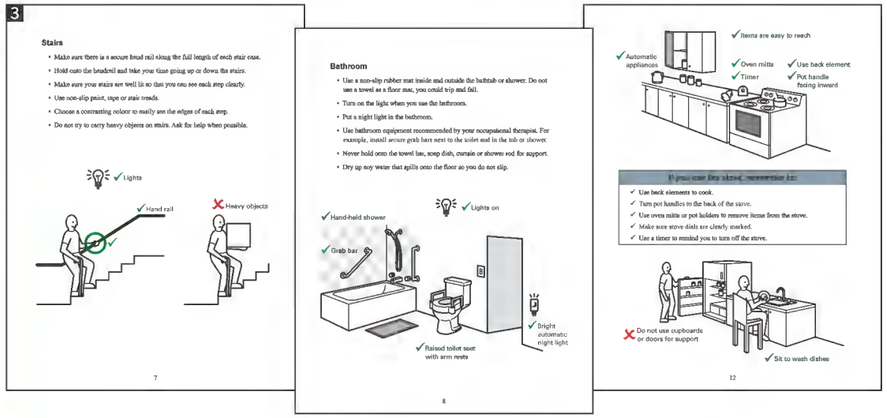
2



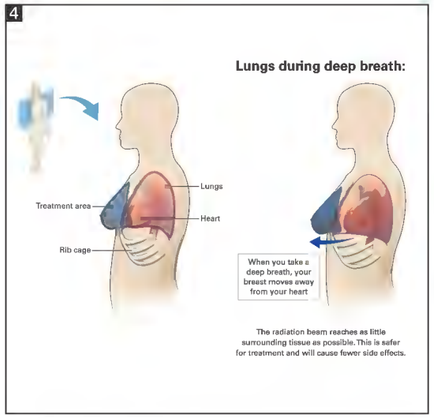
[The illustrated poster] is very much a part of the therapy process now, when patients have questions we take them to the poster to show them their surgery... It is having a real and measurable impact on the recovery process.

[Patients] said that they could easily see the reasoning behind the breath hold much better than just plain words.

3



4



1

Challenge:
Clinical educators needed a way to teach patients the effects of having a stroke.

Solution:
A poster was created to illustrate the functional areas of the brain. Clear labels in plain language describe each area, and colours are used to differentiate the lobes of the brain.

How is it benefiting patients?
Clinical educators now use the poster to teach stroke patients what part of their brain was injured and how that has affected their abilities. Patients use the poster to explain to their families what changes they are experiencing as a result of their stroke. The functional and multiple uses of the poster allow patients to actively take part in understanding their health condition.

2

Challenge:
Physiotherapists in our Muskoluskeletal Rehabilitation program found that their patients often had questions about their hip or knee surgery.

Solution:
To help answer questions and illustrate the importance of rehabilitation after surgery, a large poster was created to show the anatomy of the hip and knee joints, as well as various common replacements and repairs. Simple but eye-catching images and plain language captions and labels help patients easily understand the information.

How is it benefiting patients?
Physiotherapists and occupational therapists now use the poster whenever their patients have questions relating to their hip or knee. It is be used to demonstrate anatomy, differences before and after surgery, and areas causing pain.

3

Challenge:
A group of physiotherapists and occupational therapists needed a booklet with tips to help our senior population prevent falls at home and in the community.

Solution:
The group identified guidelines to prevent falls in each area of the home, such as the stairs, bathroom and kitchen. Simple images were created of each room to show visually how to prevent falls.

How is it benefiting patients?
Following best practice design standards for accessibility, the images address higher rates of low health literacy in older adults as well as issues of poor eyesight and language barriers. Patients can refer to the booklet at home when needed.

4

Challenge:
A clinician in our radiation therapy treatment clinic identified that some patients who were going to receive breast cancer treatment did not understand the purpose of using a breathing coordinator machine.

Solution:
An image was created to show the proximity of the heart and breast during inhalation and exhalation. Emphasis was put on the edge of the heart to show the space that is created during a deep breath.

How is it benefiting patients?
The image is now a standard part of breast cancer radiation treatment teaching, allowing patients to more easily understand why the breathing machine is used and how it impacts their safety.

References:
[illegible]
[illegible] National Academies Press.
[illegible] (2006). [illegible] recall and adherence. Patient Education and Counseling, 61, [illegible]
Koole, [illegible] Patient Education and Counseling, 64, [illegible]
[illegible] Lefebvre, Y. (1997). Gender sensitivity in medical curricula. [illegible]

Contributors:
Rita Kang, MEd
Manager, Patient & Family Education Program
Toronto Western Hospital
[illegible]
Patient Education Specialist
Patient and Family Education Program

Patient & Family Education

UHN Toronto General Toronto Western Princess Margaret Toronto Rehab