



# I

## Introduction

Reports from the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) and the Institute of Medicine (IOM) use the following definition of health literacy:

*The degree to which individuals have the capacity to obtain, process and understand basic health information and services needed to make appropriate health decisions.*

At the same time, however, both the HHS report *Communicating Health: Priorities and Strategies for Progress* and the IOM report *Health Literacy: A Prescription to End Confusion* propose an expanded understanding of the term so that both the skills of individuals and the demands of health systems are considered. The health literacy environment of a healthcare facility represents the demand side of the equation suggested by the IOM – the expectations, preferences, and skills of those providing health information and services. The purpose of this guide is to enhance communication and, at the same time, help reduce the literacy demands patients face in hospitals and health centers.

This guide focuses on key activities and tasks undertaken by both visitors and patients when they enter a healthcare facility. Patients and visitors will need to find their way to and around your facility, locate departments and offices, make use of materials given to them, fill out needed forms and questionnaires, as well as speak to staff. They will be expected to apply literacy skills to the tasks at hand.

## Focus of this Guide

Section II contains the *Health Literacy Environment Review*, a tool designed to help you consider a broad range of issues and identify existing strengths and potential barriers. Findings will enable you and your team to discuss priorities and next steps for an institution-based health literacy initiative. Such initiatives are recommended by both the Institute of Medicine Committee on Health Literacy and by the Health Literacy and Patient Safety Working Group (2005-2006) of the Joint Commission on Accreditation of Healthcare Organizations.

Section III provides suggestions for interpretation of findings and for planning. This section contains recommendations drawn from the field of health literacy. Section IV contains additional background information on health literacy, as well as resources that you may find helpful as you move forward with your health literacy initiatives.

The guide concludes with two appendices. Appendix I, *Partners for Action Examples*, includes examples of partnerships formed between healthcare facilities and other community based organizations and agencies to improve health literacy. Appendix II, *Needs Assessment Tools*, contains a number of activities that can help prepare you for the *Health Literacy Environment Review*. You may choose to do all activities, or several of them, depending on your priorities, needs, and time. Activities in this section will enable members of your team to identify existing literacy-related strengths and limitations, and set the foundation for further analyses.

For example, the **telephone assessment** will provide you with a sense of the first impression people might have of your healthcare facility. The **walking interview** will help you gain insight into physical characteristics of your healthcare facility that enhance or diminish one's ability to find one's way. The **materials assessment tools** will help you understand components of print materials that can make reading easy or challenging. The suggested workshop will be valuable to any staff members who wish to learn how to assess materials. This may also be of particular interest for human subjects training.

The **oral exchange assessment** draws on patients' experiences and impressions of communication issues. The **current technology assessment** will provide you with a mechanism to assess where and how existing technology (televisions, telephones, computers, and kiosks) are currently being used within your healthcare facility. The findings for each of these activities could be used to complete the review ratings found in the *Health Literacy Environment Review*.

## Potential Users of this Guide

Ideally, the CEO or president of a hospital or health center is the best person to take the lead on heading up the activities provided in this guide and to charge committees and/or individuals with the authority to carry out these activities.

The reviewers suggest people (by role) who could complete the *Health Literacy Environment Review* and the needs assessment activities (located in Appendix II). **These include:** Community Vice President, Director of Community Affairs, Community Resource Director, Clinic Administrator, General Medicine Clinic Medical Director, Program Director, Program Manager, Education Director, Quality Improvement Director, faculty physicians or other faculty members (with interest), Business Manager, Director of Nursing, Nurse Manager, residents (with interest), Patient Safety Committee members, and some medical assistants.

The reviewers recommend key decision makers (by role) who could carry out a **post-review analysis**. **These include:** Executive or Senior Vice President, Associate Dean for Clinical Affairs, Chairs of Department, Practice Manager, General Medicine Clinic Medical Director, Clinic Director, Clinical Leadership Teams, Patient Safety Director, Business Administrator, Residency Director, select faculty members with expertise, Director of Nursing, Nurse Manager, and Administrative/ Clinical Staff.

Various healthcare facilities have approached health literacy activities differently—some have formed teams within their healthcare facility and others have formed partnerships with outside organizations such as adult education centers, libraries, and academic institutions. Whether your facility works independently or with an outside agency, we hope this guide enables you to identify and to begin eliminating literacy barriers within your healthcare facility.

We recommend that you begin the review process described in this guide by identifying key decision makers within your healthcare facility. Documented and articulated institutional policies covering print and oral exchange are critical in light of what we know about adult literacy in the U.S. Research indicates that increased awareness of and sensitivity to health literacy can enhance learning, increase appointment keeping and compliance with regimens, improve patient safety, remove access barriers, and reduce costs. Policies, protocols, and procedures are the cornerstones of efficient and consistent operation of any facility.

You will want to identify individuals who are best able to complete the review, those who are best able to consider the findings, and those who are best able to set and implement new policies, protocols, and procedures. They may not be all the same people. We provide you with a form on the following pages to help you identify key decision makers within your healthcare facility.

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## Key Personnel for Review & Planning Form

Please identify the people whose responsibility it is to...

1. Conduct new staff and volunteer orientation

_____	_____
_____	_____

2. Train staff and volunteers how to answer the telephone

_____	_____
_____	_____

3. Train staff and volunteers at the welcome or help desk

_____	_____
_____	_____

4. Offer professional development seminars

_____	_____
_____	_____

5. Develop patient orientation materials unique to your facility  
(such as welcome brochures, information booklets, and patients' rights & responsibilities postings)

_____	_____
_____	_____

6. Develop forms that patients fill out that are unique to your facility  
(such as intake forms, health insurance forms, and medical history forms)

_____	_____
_____	_____

**Please continue onto next page →**

7. Develop patient education materials unique to your facility  
(such as disease and medicine descriptions)

_____	_____
_____	_____

8. Develop community relations materials unique to your facility  
(such as mailings and promotional materials)

_____	_____
_____	_____

9. Develop maps and signs

_____	_____
_____	_____

10. Oversee Institutional Review Board (IRB) reviews

_____	_____
_____	_____

11. Develop and review informed consent materials

_____	_____
_____	_____

12. Set policies and protocols within departments/divisions

_____	_____
_____	_____

13. Oversee institutional policies and protocols

_____	_____
_____	_____