

# THE HEALTH LITERACY ENVIRONMENT OF HOSPITALS AND HEALTH CENTERS

*Partners for Action:*  
Making Your Healthcare Facility  
Literacy-Friendly

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Health Literacy Studies (HLS) is located in the Department of Society, Human Development, and Health at the Harvard School of Public Health. HLS is a research program linked to the National Center for the Study of Adult Learning and Literacy (NCSALL). The members of the HLS team are engaged in a variety of research and implementation studies focused on communication and literacy skills to explore the pathways from education to health outcomes, to determine literacy-related barriers to a variety of health services and care, and to identify skills needed to access care, manage chronic diseases, and participate in disease prevention activities. HLS' work is based in community, public health, healthcare, and adult education settings. HLS' goal is to help reduce health disparities.

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*The Health Literacy Environment of Hospitals and Health Centers* can be found online at [www.ncsall.net](http://www.ncsall.net) and at [www.hsph.harvard.edu/healthliteracy](http://www.hsph.harvard.edu/healthliteracy).

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*Patients' ability to understand health and medical issues and directions is related to the clarity of the communication.*

-Communicating Health: Priorities & Strategies for Progress  
U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2003

*Health literacy emerges when the expectations, preferences, and skills of individuals seeking health information and services meet the expectations, preferences, and skills of those providing information and services.*

-Health Literacy: A Prescription to End Confusion  
Institute of Medicine, 2004

*Health literacy is the currency of success for improving emergency preparedness, eliminating health disparities, and preventing disease.*

-U.S. Surgeon General Dr. Richard Carmona, 2004



## Preface

Research indicates that increased awareness of and sensitivity to health literacy can enhance patients' learning, increase appointment keeping and compliance with regimens, improve patient safety, and remove barriers to accessing care. We ask you to consider the literacy demands of a hospital or health center.

The *health literacy environment* of a healthcare facility represents the expectations, preferences, and skills of those providing health information and services. Some of these demands are in the form of physical aspects of the hospital or health center, such as signs and postings. At the same time, access to and navigation of health services involves the use of a broader range of print materials such as applications, rights and responsibilities postings, payment calculations, medical history forms, directives, information booklets, and consent forms. In addition, the oral exchange in discussions with providers is of critical importance. Healthcare workers often use the language of their discipline, and words may get in the way of clear communication.

The Institute of Medicine (IOM) Committee on Health Literacy suggests that over 90 million U.S. adults do not have the literacy skills to access and use U.S. health systems. While the majority of U.S. adults can and do read, about half of U.S. adults have difficulty using commonly found print materials such as the dose charts on an over-the-counter medicine to accomplish everyday tasks such as determining how much medicine to give a child. Over 500 peer reviewed articles in public health and medical journals indicate a mismatch between the reading grade level of health materials and the average reading skills of U.S. adults. In addition, findings from the International Adult Literacy & Lifeskills Survey conducted in 2003 indicate that across industrialized nations, healthcare systems are becoming increasingly complex.

This guide and the review tools found within it offer an approach for analyzing literacy-related barriers to healthcare access and navigation. We designed this guide to assist chief executive officers, presidents, program directors, administrators, and healthcare workers at hospitals or health centers to consider the health literacy environment of their healthcare facilities and to analyze ways to reduce demands, to better serve their patients and staff and ultimately to increase revenue.

If you choose to undertake such a review, findings could spark discussions and help shape strategies to eliminate literacy barriers and enhance health literacy.

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<sup>1</sup> Literacy Alberta (formerly Alberta Association for Adult Literacy),"The Literacy Audit Kit". Developed by Susan Devins and Anne Scott in 1997. For more info on the complete kit please email [office@literacyalberta.ca](mailto:office@literacyalberta.ca) or visit [www.literacyalberta.ca](http://www.literacyalberta.ca)





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