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# The ABC of Looking After Your Health

## What is Health Literacy

by Adrian Rigg, Freelance Health Writer and Contributor to *Hep Review* magazine. This article was reprinted from *Hep Review* Edition 84, Autumn, June 2014

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**H**ealth literacy refers to our understanding of what we need to do to maintain good health. Most people know that eating a balanced diet and getting some exercise are the basics of good health, but that is only part of good health literacy.

'Literacy' means the ability to understand and use a language. In the case of health literacy, this includes the language of doctors, prescriptions, information brochures and public health campaigns. We need to be able to understand these in a way that is relevant to our own lives. Of course, the more complicated our health issues become, the harder it can be to assess our situation.

This can be the case with hep C as it is such a complex virus, with different types and genotypes. Hep C affects people in different ways, and it can be years before symptoms are really seen. Treatment is also complicated and brings its own problems and side effects. Many people don't take action about their hep C for some time after being diagnosed; they may need time to think about it all, to improve their health literacy and to reach a point in their lives where they are ready to act. However, during this time, they may still need good support, and information on what they can do to stay healthy - this may be different from how they have previously lived.

### Why is health literacy important?

Health literacy is important to individuals because it can allow them to take better control of their health. It is also important to society as a whole; the more that people are able to take care of their own health, the less it will cost our health system in the long term.



The Australian Commission on Safety and Quality in Health Care, an Australian Government Agency, reported last year that lower health literacy corresponds with higher rates of hospitalisation, lower uptakes of preventative strategies such as vaccinations, poorer ability to take medications appropriately, and a higher risk of death among older people. The Australian Bureau of Statistics (A.B.S.) found that people with better health literacy generally have better health, and that those with lower health literacy have poorer health; those with worse health may have chronic conditions and poorer knowledge of how to look after themselves. In this way, an untreated condition can become a lifelong illness.

Health literacy really comes out when we have health problems. We need to recognise the symptoms that need attention from a doctor, and we also need to be able to describe to the doctor how we feel.

Part of this is about being comfortable enough with the doctor that there is no embarrassment, and being able to trust them to treat us with respect and confidentiality. This comes from both sides of the doctor-patient relationship, and is essential to a good outcome.

We also need to be able to understand what the doctor tells us about our health; there can be a lot of information to take in, so we also need to know which questions to ask immediately, and how to find more information later.

We need to be able to access specific and trustworthy information; there is a huge amount of information on any subject available online, but it is not all accurate or relevant.

There are reliable, helpful online sources of information such as the [Hepatitis N.S.W. website](#) ; more specifically, if you want to chat and share experiences with other people with hep C, [Hep C Australasia](#)  is an independent, community-based forum for sharing stories and knowledge.

Knowing how to find these sites, and how to use them, is an important part of health literacy.

### How we use our health literacy

Like most things in life, we can choose to apply what we know, or ignore it, and we may act in different ways at different stages of life. Knowing that regular exercise is important for good health, we might walk to the shops instead of driving. But once there, we might choose to ignore what we know about eating fruit and vegetables and buy a greasy takeaway instead. The same applies to more complex situations; often the more complicated things become, the easier it is to switch off. When there are too many things that we feel that we *should* or *should not* be doing, it can be overwhelming.

That is why it is important to have good support from health professionals. Good health professionals will be able to empathise, and to understand the level of communication required to meet their patients' needs.

Access to what we need for good health is also important. Julie, a healthcare worker at a Western Sydney clinic, says that one barrier to people doing the right thing for their health is lack of access to resources.

"Some suburbs have nowhere to buy fresh fruit, and no easy access to healthcare facilities", says Julie. "If an area doesn't have a bus route, then people without a car don't have many options".

Julie also says that at her clinic they have found that the best way to help people understand how to look after themselves is through positive messages.

"Our messages are along the lines of 'Do it this way and you will have a better experience', rather than 'Don't do that or you will damage your veins'.", says Julie.

They also reinforce messages in a way that clients can understand, which is often best done visually.

"I often describe veins as being similar to a garden hose: if it has lots of holes in it, less water can get through to where it is needed", says Julie. "This also helps people understand that some damage can be permanent".

## Education and health literacy

Education has direct and indirect impacts on our health. Our level of education can determine the type of job we have; income has a big effect on our health, influencing where we live, our quality of housing, our diet, and our access to health care. Australian Bureau of Statistics found in 2006 that 63 percent of people in high income groups have adequate or better health literacy skills, compared with 43 percent in middle income groups and 26 percent in lower income groups.

Higher education levels can influence a person's ability to find the information they need to keep themselves healthy, as well as the ability to make good decisions about their health. Further education equips people with the skills to interpret information such as prescriptions and health brochures.

## Where do people get health information?

Most people will get some health information from a health professional, such as their G.P. or nurse. Health professionals need a good knowledge of health literacy.

Obviously they need to understand the health issues they will come across, but they also need to be able to explain complex issues thoroughly and clearly, and in a way that each patient can understand. If they can accurately assess the level of their patients health literacy, they can communicate better and help them improve their health.

This should also influence the way health services are structured, so that people can better navigate them.

When Jackie found out she had hep C twenty years ago, there were few resources she could find to help her.

"I was told that it was incurable and that was about it", says Jackie. "My G.P. at that time seemed to know very little about it himself".

She was extremely ill for two weeks and would have really benefited from some support services. Now Jacki visits a clinic and needle exchange centre where she finds there is a lot of information and support available. "They are totally non-judgemental and share information about anything", says Jackie. "They make everyone welcome, even just to drop in for a coffee".

## How could health literacy be improved?

Providing information is the key to helping people improve their health literacy. This includes formal education such as school, where young people can be taught about good health and given the confidence to access useful information.

It is also important for health professionals to be able to communicate well with patients at different levels; they also need the resources, such as brochures and knowledge about support groups, that they can share these with the people who need them.

Studies have shown that a lot of medical information patients receive from health professionals is forgotten once the patient leaves the medical centre - and much of the information retained is incorrect.

One of the easiest ways to close the communication gap between health professional and patient is to employ the 'teach-back' method. This is a way to confirm that the worker has explained to the patient what they need to know in a manner that the patient understands.

Patient understanding is confirmed when they explain the health message or information back to the health professional.

Just knowing that health information and support are available is very important; someone who was diagnosed with hep C many years ago may not be aware that they can now have access to good treatment and support.

Jackie thinks that education and access to information are essential. "Information that can be taken away is good - it can be available without having the difficulty of asking for it", she says.

For more information about health literacy, phone the Hepatitis Infoline on 1800 803 990 and mention this article.

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