

ADVANCING HEALTH LITERACY THROUGH PRIMARY HEALTH CARE SYSTEMS

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POLICY CONTEXT

Evidence from Australia and elsewhere shows that large numbers of people do not have the level of health literacy needed to navigate the health care system and manage their health. Health literacy refers to a range of abilities, from basic literacy and numeracy to more advanced skills that promote health, and help to prevent illness, maintain health care and successfully navigate the health care system for health benefit. Awareness and recognition of the significance of health literacy to support health outcomes and to ameliorate health care costs has been slow to materialise in Australia. National comprehensive policy and practice initiatives have not been developed. This systematic review addresses the question, 'what are the characteristics of a primary health care system that supports and enables the development of health literacy and what are the drivers and barriers of such a system?'

KEY FINDINGS

- About 60 per cent of Australian adults lack skills needed to manage their health or navigate the health care system.
- Lower health literacy crosses the full spectrum of the population. Patients most at risk are the elderly, those in a lower socioeconomic group, migrants from non-English speaking countries and people with poor cognitive functioning or limited formal education.
- Evidence shows health literacy is a robust indicator of patients' self-management skills and health outcomes: medication adherence, disease knowledge, use of health services (especially the use of emergency v preventive services) health status and mortality.
- There has been very little attention given to quantifying the health literacy burden that the current primary health care system places on consumers.
- There is good evidence for interventions to ameliorate the effects of lower health literacy: simpler and more engaging written materials, illustrative aids, and patient-provider interpersonal communication as well as the use of mentors, educators and multimedia, which presents factual medical information in graphical, audio or video formats.
- There is little evidence to support screening for low health literacy in clinical settings. Given the potential risks and the absence of readily available interventions for low health literacy, changing universal clinical practice to reduce literacy burden for all consumers is likely to be a more effective and equitable approach.

For more details, go to the [three page report](#)

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