

# *5 Diamond Patient Safety Program*

## **Health Literacy**

*2010*

*\* This presentation was collaboratively developed by the Mid-Atlantic Renal Coalition (MARC) and the ESRD Network of New England for the 5-Diamond Patient Safety Program.*

*The 5-Diamond Patient Safety Program is endorsed by the Renal Physicians Association (RPA) and American Nephrology Nurses' Association (ANNA).*

# Health Literacy

- Health literacy is not simply the ability to read. It requires a complex group of reading, listening, analytical and decision-making skills and the ability to apply these skills to health situations
- Literacy impacts health knowledge, health status and access to health services
- According to the American Medical Association, poor health literacy is "a stronger predictor of a person's health than age, income, employment status, education level and race"

# Health Literacy

- Health literacy, as defined in *Healthy People 2010*\* is "The degree to which individuals have the capacity to obtain, process, and understand basic health information and services needed to make appropriate health decisions"
- Health literacy includes the ability to understand instructions on prescription drug bottles, appointment slips, medical education brochures, doctor's directions and consent forms and the ability to negotiate complex health care systems

\* *Healthy People 2010*, created by scientists and the Government, is a comprehensive set of disease prevention and national health promotion objectives. <http://www.healthypeople.gov/>

# Vulnerable Populations

- Elderly (age 60+) - Two thirds of U.S. adults age 60 and over have inadequate or marginal literacy skills, and 81% of patients age 60 and older (*surveyed*) at a public hospital could not read or understand basic materials such as prescription labels (*Williams, MV. JAMA, December 6, 1995*)
- Minorities
- Immigrants
- People with low income/at poverty level
- People with chronic mental and/or physical health conditions

# Reasons for Limited Literacy Skills

- Lack of educational opportunity - people with a high school education or lower
- Learning disabilities
- Cognitive decline in older adults
- Use it or lose it – Without continuous mental stimulation, reading abilities can typically fall from three to five grade levels below the last year of school completed
- Language and/or cultural barriers

# How Can Facilities Help Patients with Limited Literacy Skills?

- Raise awareness about health literacy with staff
- Avoid assumptions about patient's comprehension of health information
- Recognize literacy problems
- Enhance patient education
  - Utilize innovative communication strategies (use of pictures and “teach back” method)
  - Adapt materials and tools to be user-friendly and understandable for various skill levels

# Raise Awareness

- Include topic of health literacy in staff meetings
- Brainstorm ideas for utilizing effective techniques when communicating with patients
- Staff review of *8 Ways You Can Improve Health Communication* tool
- Discuss “teach back” method
  - To confirm understanding, ask patients to state in their own words (i.e. teach back) key concepts, decisions or instructions discussed
  - If patients cannot restate correctly, then explain again by drawing pictures or using simpler words
  - Use the “teach back” method again until there is confirmation the message is correctly understood

# Avoid Assumptions

- Health care professionals cannot assume all patients know how to read at a high proficiency level
- Direct questioning about reading level may not be effective, as illiteracy often causes shame and embarrassment
- Health care professionals should be sensitive to language barriers

# Recognizing Literacy Problems

- Assessing a patient's reading skills can be helpful to health care professionals by providing insight into an individual's ability to function adequately in the health care environment
- It is also important to recognize commonly used phrases by patients in an attempt to hide their illiteracy, such as:
  - “I forgot my reading glasses”
  - “I'll read through this when I get home”
  - “May I take the instructions home?”
- Other signs include an inability to keep scheduled appointments, follow medical instructions or adhere to prescribed treatment

# Types of Literacy Assessment

- Word Recognition – useful indicator of general reading ability that typically requires an individual to read aloud from a list of words
- Reading Comprehension – helps to determine basic literacy level and general assessment of comprehension, rather than strict word recognition
- Functional Health Literacy - assesses how well patients not only comprehend, but also implement real-world examples of health care situations

# Enhance Patient Education

- Utilize Innovative Communication Strategies
  - Use comic strips and illustrations to convey information (i.e. pain rating scale)
  - Incorporate “teach back” method in patient plan of care
- Adapt Materials and Tools
  - Use simple words
  - Avoid long, complex sentences
  - Use a readable type style (Time New Roman or Serif)
  - Use appropriate space between lines (generally 1.2 to 1.5 spacing)
  - Signal main points with **bold** or highlights

Special thank you to

**Helen Osborne, M.Ed., OTR/L**

**[www.healthliteracy.com](http://www.healthliteracy.com)**

for providing health literacy material and resources