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POLICY BRIEF

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Health Literacy Survey

Recent studies have uncovered the connections between literacy levels and health status and have found extensive evidence that low literacy and poor health outcomes are inextricably linked. In conducting a survey in Monterey County, California, we found health literacy improves when individuals are enrolled in a health-related education program compared with individuals not so enrolled. In our survey of 198 respondents, predominantly Mexican-American and low-income, we identified their health status, their access to health services, co-existent literacy and cultural competency issues related to obtaining quality healthcare.

Health literacy is not just about knowledge. It is about accessing timely medical information, communication and understanding between provider and patient, cross cultural relations with providers and patients taking action to improve their health; so much more than just having the ability to read medical information.

“A 54-year old Greenfield woman diagnosed with end stage renal disease after being treated for diabetes followed her physician’s orders, took insulin as prescribed, attended diabetes education classes, had dietician counseling and still ended up with needing dialysis. The woman, who is Mexican-American and speaks Spanish, felt very frightened about her outcome. She didn’t know what questions to ask and the unknown was more terrifying than her actual condition.”

Our survey, commissioned by the Health Literacy Coalition and funded by the California Endowment, was conducted from July 2004 to May 2005. A total of 198 survey respondents were identified with the assistance of the following community organizations who are members of the Health Literacy Coalition:

- Women, Infant and Children Program in Salinas (35 respondents)
- Clinica de Salud in Castroville and Greenfield (26 respondents)
- Salinas Adult School (137 respondents)

The data results are very similar for WIC and Clinica enrollees who have direct access to health information and medical providers vs. major differences identified with the Adult School respondents who have access to literacy instruction but are not enrolled in a health-related education program.

Finding: Strengthening Individual Consumer Knowledge and Skills

The individuals enrolled in the health-related programs had doctors who provided health information resulting in fewer literacy barriers, a better understanding of health education materials, health-related signage and even their health insurance policy.

The individuals enrolled in the health-related programs were better able to use their language of origin to make appointments, talk with their doctor, to use an interpreter and converse with bilingual staff in their physician's office.

The individuals enrolled in the health-related programs said their doctor explained what their family needs to know, answers all questions resulting in a better understanding of their doctor's orders.

Finding: Access to Health Services

Individuals enrolled in the health-related programs utilize clinics more often and were more likely to see a doctor than to use an alternative remedy.

Individuals enrolled in the health-related programs had a greater knowledge of community resources and more of an ability to afford adequate health insurance.

Finding: Health Status Issues

Individuals enrolled in the health-related programs were freer from illness, had less untreated medical conditions and were managing health issues more adequately; even with family members having more severe pain in the last month.

Individuals enrolled in the health-related programs were more able to get medical care when needed with greater likelihood of health treatments meeting their needs.

Finding: Satisfaction with Health Providers

Individuals enrolled in the health-related programs reported greater interest, respect, and openness to the patient's viewpoint leading to a greater satisfaction in how the doctor treats them as a person.

Individuals enrolled in the health-related programs also report greater trust in their doctor resulting in following their advice and satisfaction in the quality of care.

Finding: Medication Compliance

Individuals enrolled in the health-related programs reported greater understanding of the side effects associated with the medications their doctor prescribes.

Individuals enrolled in the health-related programs are more likely to have a regular pharmacy and know how to pay for medications.

