


Health Literacy in Canada: What is the Role of Public Health?



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Outline

- ❑ Background
- ❑ What is health literacy?
- ❑ How big a problem is it?
- ❑ What do we know about the barriers to health literacy?
- ❑ What do we know about what is happening in Canada?
- ❑ What do we know about the effectiveness of interventions?
- ❑ What should we do as a nation to address health literacy?
- ❑ What is the role of public health?
- ❑ What are potential roles and opportunities for PHAC/HC?
- ❑ What is next?

Background

- ❑ OPHA/Frontier College Literacy and Health Project (1989-1993)
- ❑ National Literacy and Health Program (1994-present)
- ❑ CPHA Clear Language Service (1997)
- ❑ National Conferences on Literacy and Health (2000, 2004)
- ❑ Health Literacy in Rural Nova Scotia (2000-2004)
- ❑ National Literacy and Health Research Project (2002-2006)
- ❑ CPHA Expert Panel on Health Literacy (2006-2007)

Mandate of Expert Panel

1. Define the scope of the problem of health literacy in the context of literacy and health
2. Identify barriers to creating a health literate public reflective of Canada's unique cultural makeup
3. Assess the effectiveness of existing interventions to improve health literacy
4. Assess the implications of the evidence for policies and programs to improve health literacy through the development of recommendations for health literacy efforts

Actions of Expert Panel to date

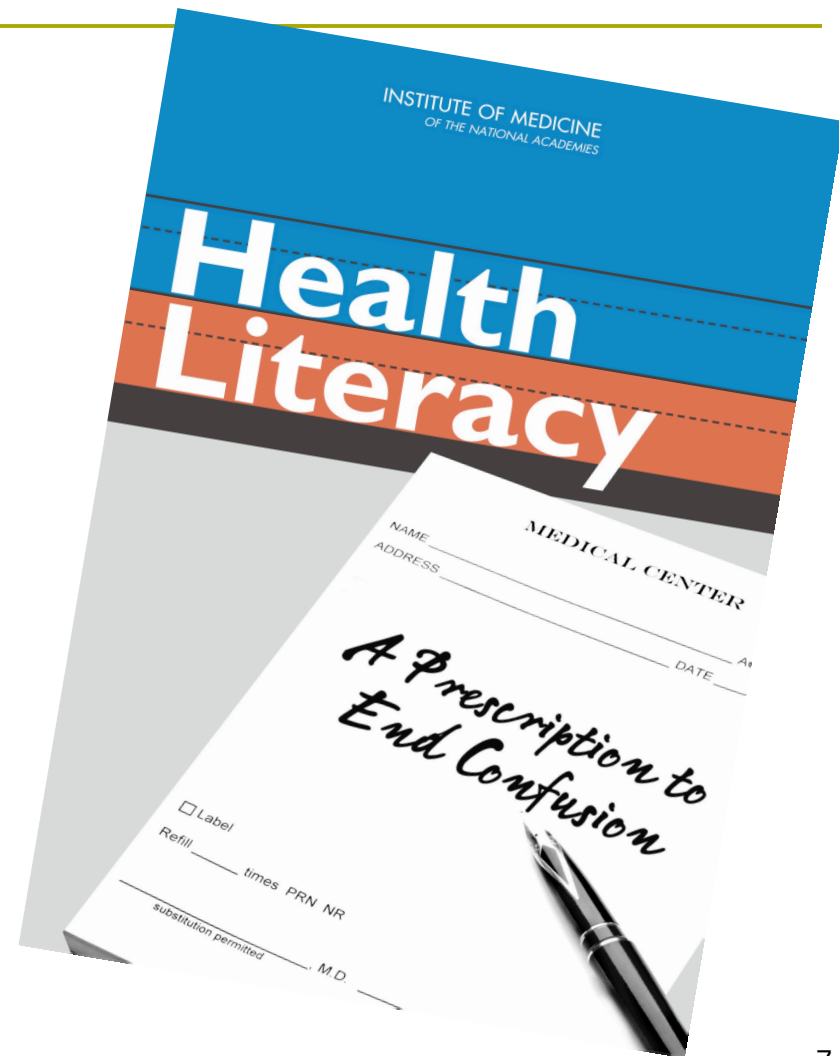
- ❑ Committee meetings
- ❑ Definition
- ❑ Conceptual Framework
- ❑ Literature review
- ❑ Key informant interviews
- ❑ Survey of practitioners
- ❑ Focus groups with learners
- ❑ Scan of interventions
- ❑ Partnership with National Collaborating Centre for Determinants of Health & CPHA
- ❑ Presentations (e.g. Panel at CPHA)
- ❑ Draft report and recommendations
- ❑ Consultations

Health Literacy is...

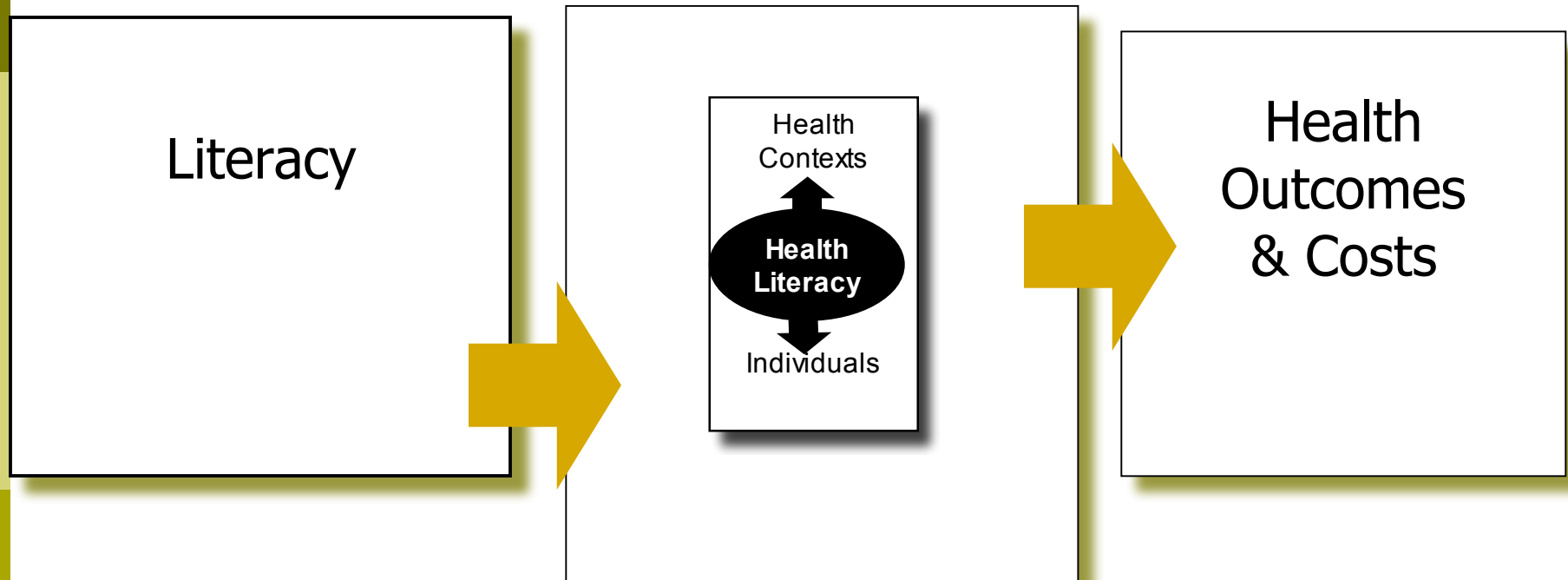
- The cognitive and social skills which determine the motivation and ability of individuals to gain access to, understand, and use information in ways which promote and maintain good health (Kickbusch and Nutbeam, 1998 in WHO Health Promotion Glossary)

Health Literacy 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 (I.O.M., 2004)**



Health Literacy Framework (I.O.M., 2004)

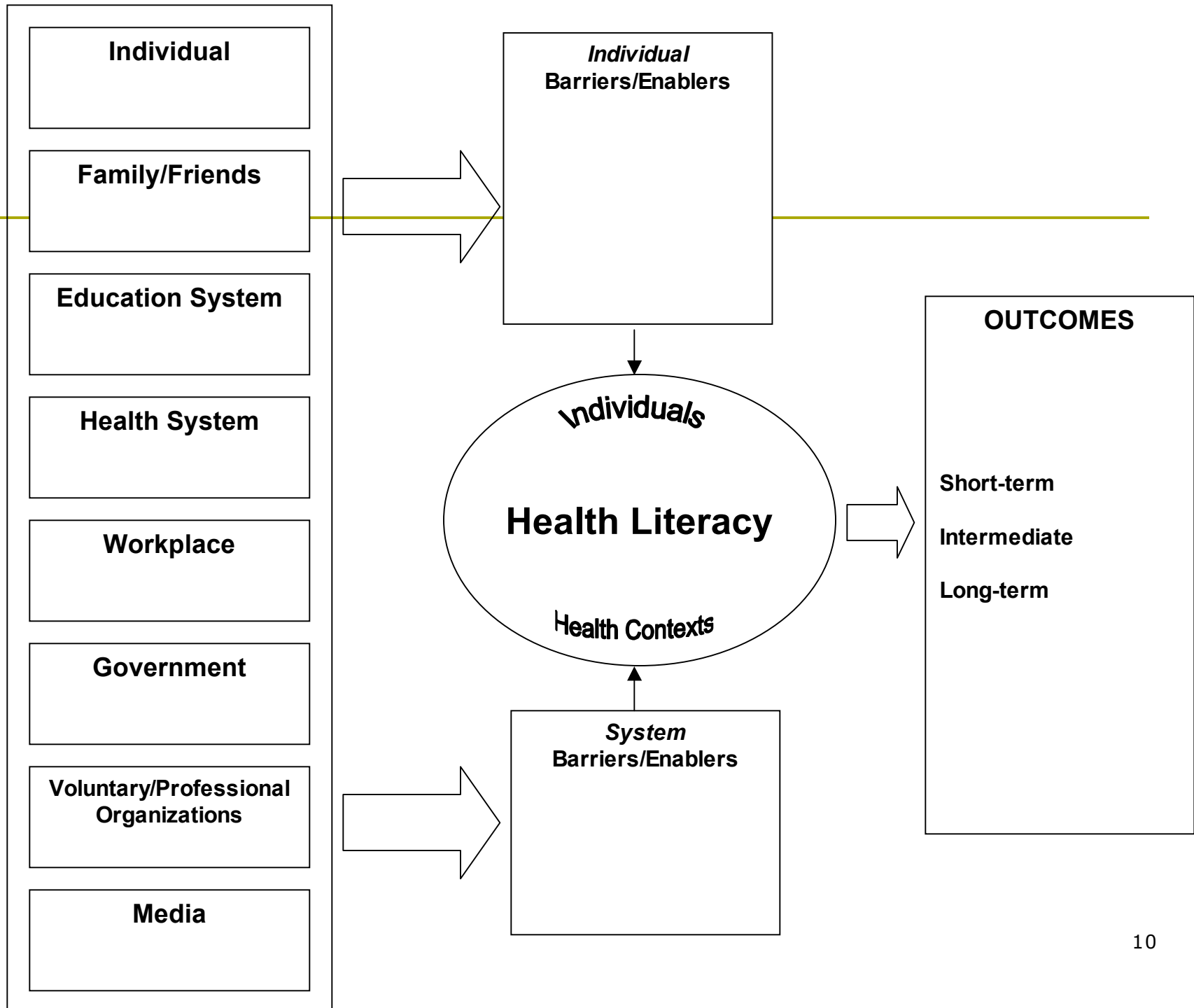


An Operational Definition

- *The degree to which people are able to access, understand, appraise and communicate information to engage with the demands of different health contexts in order to promote and maintain good health across the life-course*

(B.C. Health Literacy Research Team, 2006)

Intervention Agents



Many Canadians Lack Adequate Literacy and Health Literacy

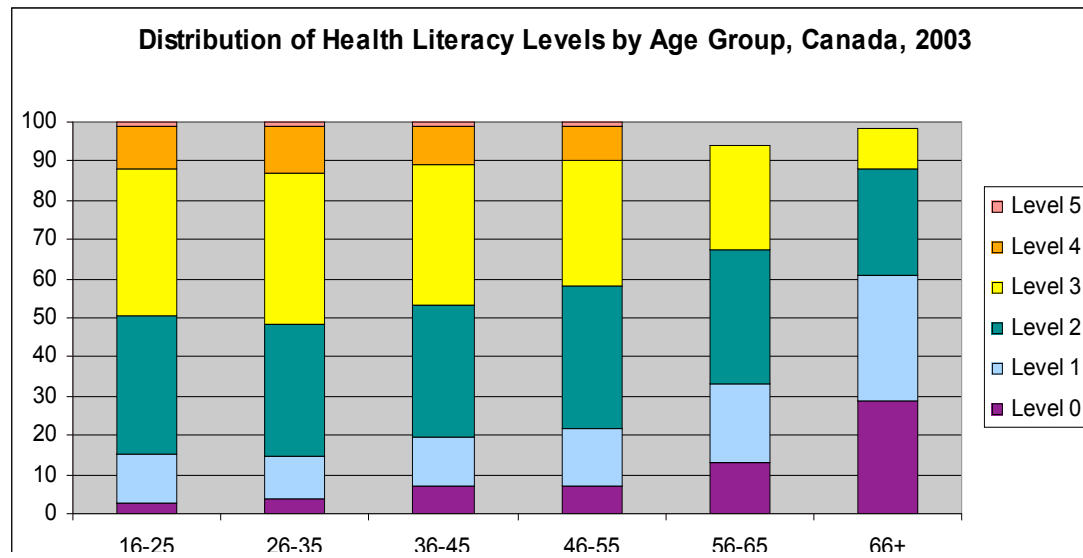
IALSS literacy scores among working age Canadians:

- **42%** fell below Level 3 on the **Prose Scale**
- **43%** fell below Level 3 level on the **Document Scale**
- **50%** fell below Level 3 the **Numeracy Scale**
- **55 %** fell below Level 3 on the **Health Literacy Scale**
- **58%** fell below Level 3 on the **Problem-Solving Scale**

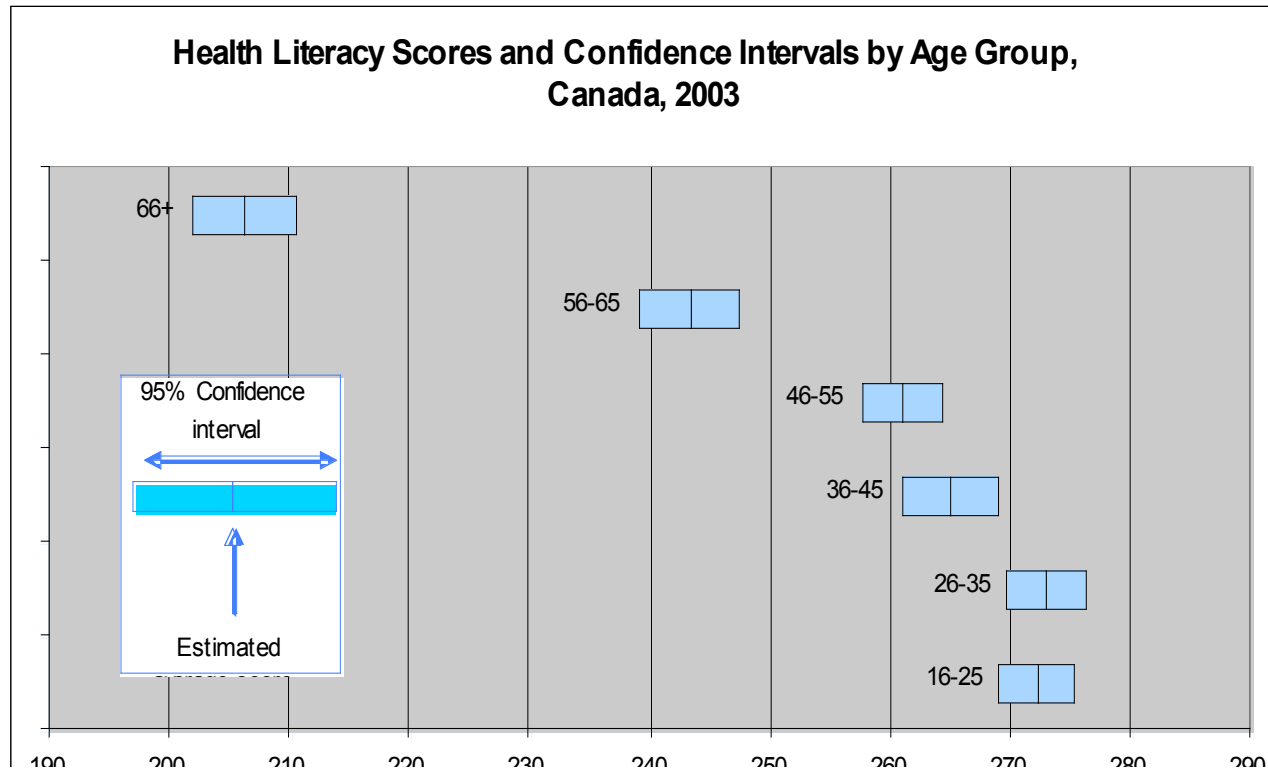
- **88%** of *Canadians over the age of 65* fell below Level 3 on the **Health Literacy Scale**

Level 3 is considered the minimum level of proficiency required to meet the demands of modern day life including those posed by health issues.

Health Literacy Levels by Age Group

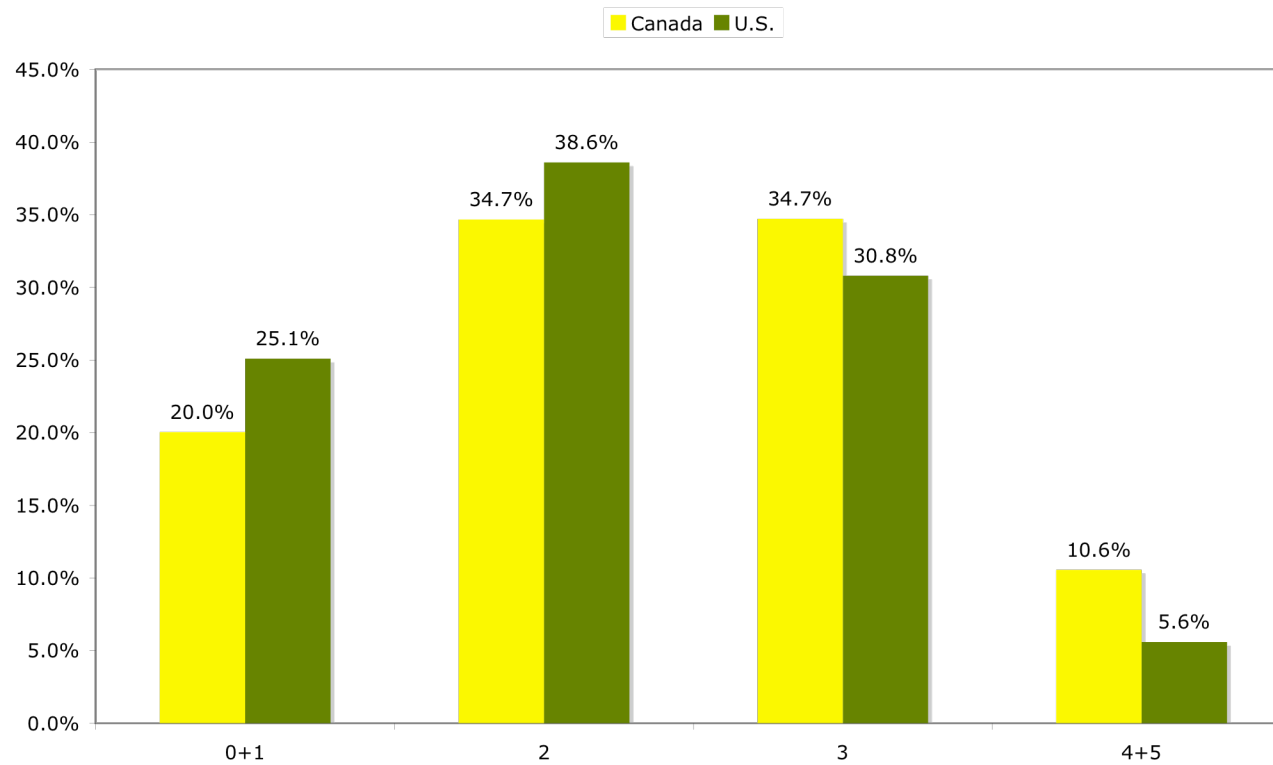


Health Literacy Scores by Age Group



Health Literacy Levels: Canada & U.S.

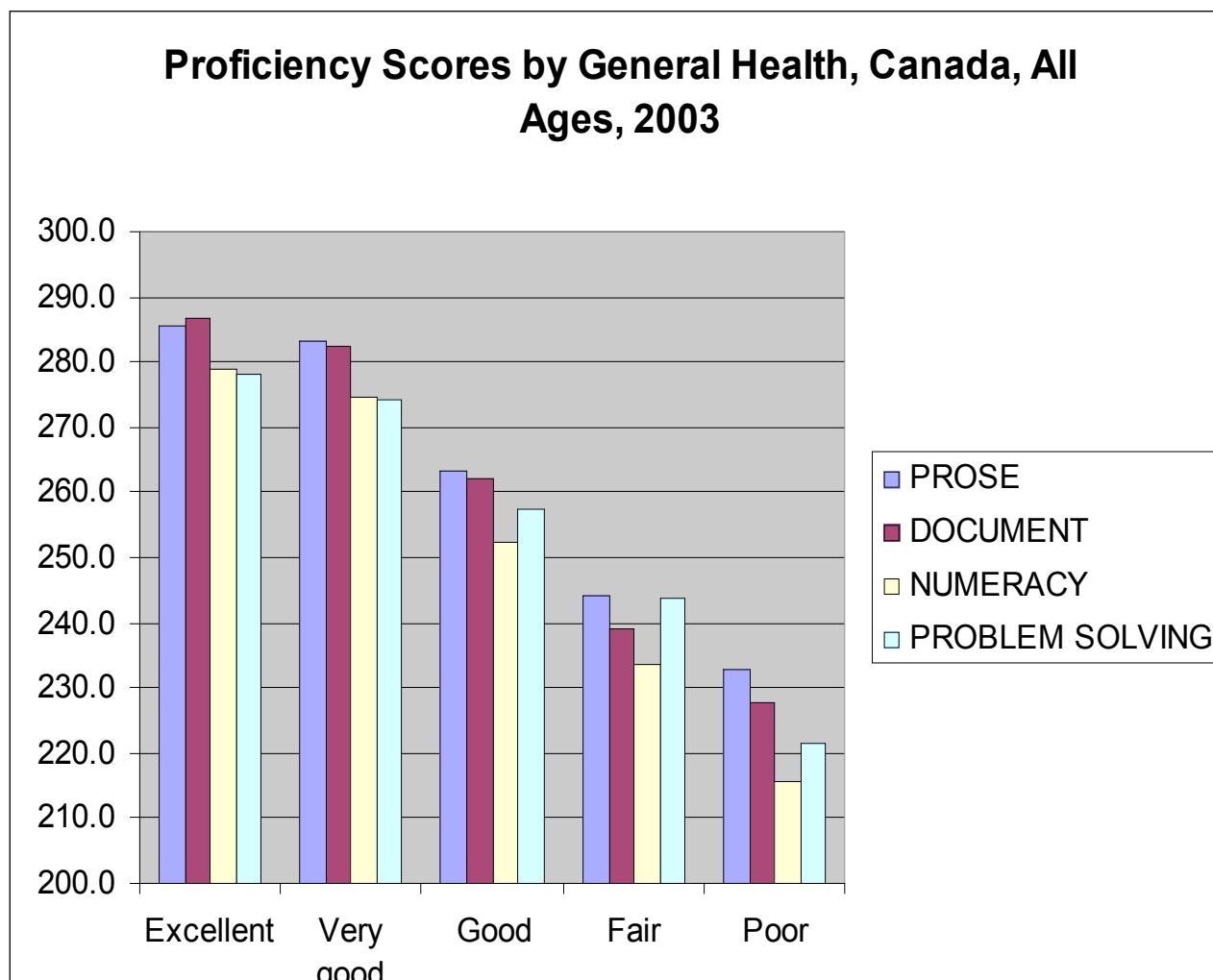
Health Literacy Levels, age 16-65, Canada and U.S., 2003



Relationship to health

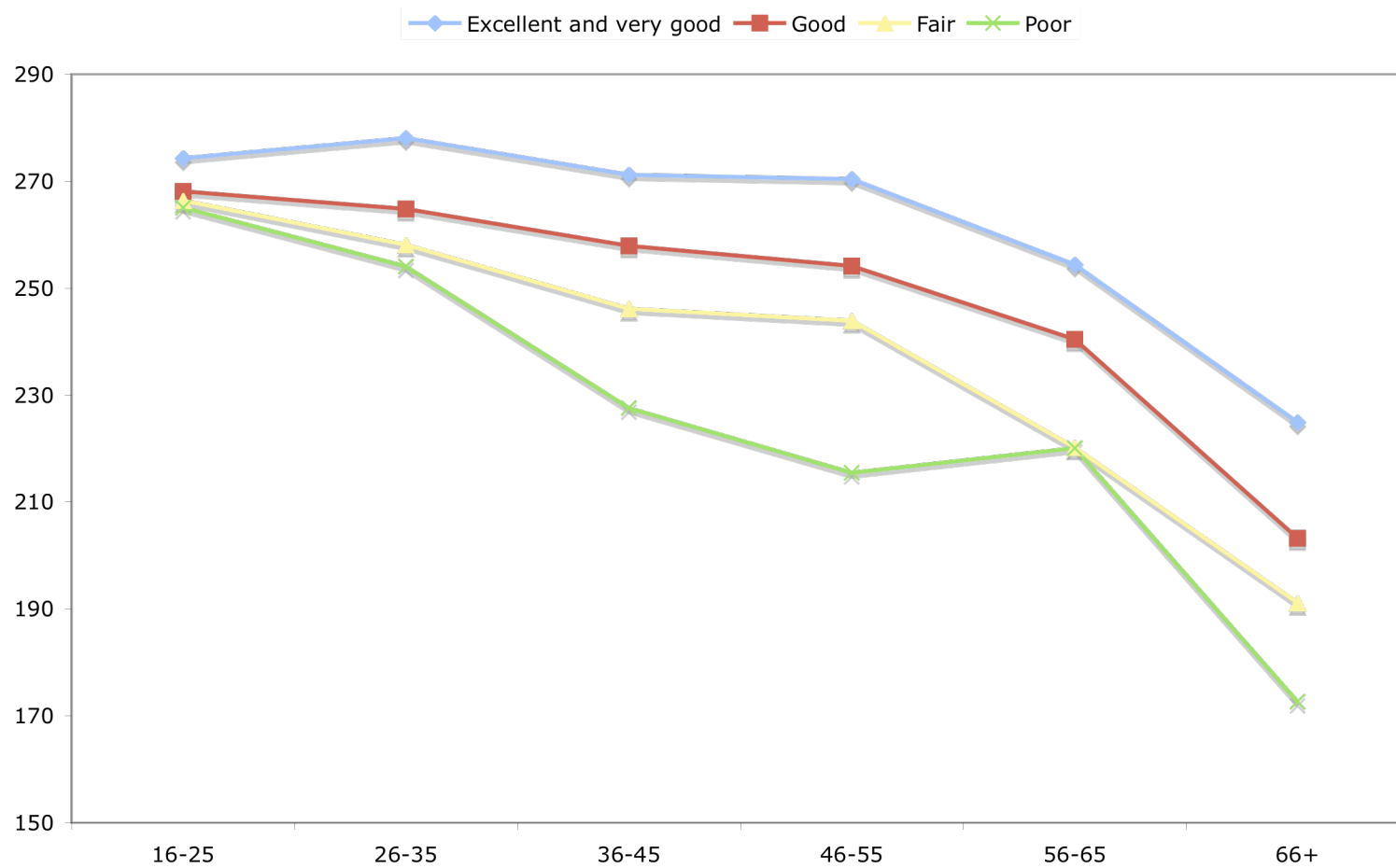
- Both literacy and health literacy are related to perceived health status according to the IALSS

Proficiency Scores by General Health for All Ages



Health Literacy by Age and Health Status

Health Literacy by age and health status, Canada³, 2003



Relationship to health (Cont.)

- ❑ Reduced capacity to learn
- ❑ Reduced capacity for employment
- ❑ Reduced income
- ❑ Reduced access to information and services
- ❑ Difficulties navigating health systems
- ❑ Difficulties understanding and acting on health communications
- ❑ Reduced capacity for self care and care of families
- ❑ Inter-generational impacts

OVERALL, REDUCED CAPACITY TO MANAGE HEALTH (for individuals, families and communities)

Relationship to health (Cont.)

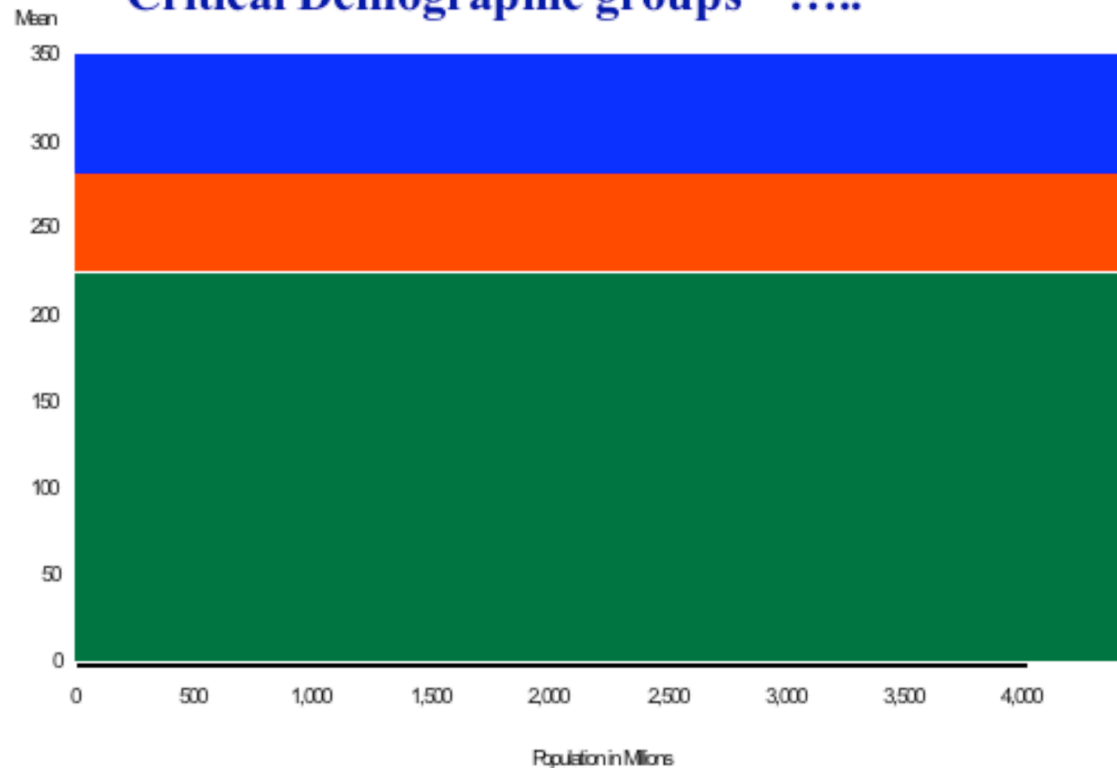
- Literacy and Health Literacy also appear to be related to other health outcomes including
 - Inappropriate medication use and compliance with physician orders
 - Less sharing in decision-making about treatment
 - Less health knowledge
 - Some health behaviors
 - Difficulties using the health care system
 - Less use of preventive services and care seeking
 - Greater hospitalization
 - Some clinical indicators
 - Higher health care costs
 - Less engagement in community and society

Groups Confronting Barriers

- The following population groups appear to be more likely to face barriers to literacy and health literacy:
 - Older adults
 - People with less education
 - People with lower income
 - Non-English or French speakers
 - Franco-phones
 - Immigrants
 - Aboriginal people

Health Literacy Levels in Critical Demographic Groups

Average Health Literacy Levels are Weak in several Critical Demographic groups



Source: Health Literacy in Canada, Statistics Canada 2005.

Barriers to Creating a Health Literate Public

- The following are some of the key ***individual*** barriers that have been identified:
 - Low General Literacy
 - Poor English/French Fluency
 - Certain Cultural Beliefs and Norms
 - Limited Personal Capacities
 - Lower Educational Level
 - Low Income
 - Low Social Support
 - Low Self-efficacy

Barriers to Creating a Health Literate Public

- The following are some of the key ***system*** barriers that have been identified:
 - Low public and professional awareness
 - Few policies
 - Few programs
 - Ineffective provider practices
 - Low availability of clear language materials and materials suitable for different language and cultural groups
 - Absence of political will
 - Insufficient research

How barriers are experienced-

Health Contexts

- ❑ Difficulties reading information on medications, health info pamphlets, food labels, forms from doctors and hospitals, appointment slips
- ❑ Difficulties communicating health concerns
- ❑ Unsure what questions to ask when in contact with health professionals
- ❑ Limited time with doctors to ask questions to ensure compliance with self-care and treatment instructions
- ❑ Lack of understanding of literacy and language issues on part of service providers
- ❑ Limited access to community services that provide information and support
- ❑ Lack of shared practice models

How barriers are experienced-

Socio-economic contexts

- ❑ Difficulties reading information on medications, health info pamphlets, food labels, forms from doctors and hospitals, appointment slips
- ❑ Difficulties communicating health concerns
- ❑ Unsure what questions to ask when in contact with health professionals
- ❑ Limited time with doctors to ask questions to ensure compliance with self care and treatment instructions
- ❑ Lack of understanding of literacy and language issues on part of service providers
- ❑ Limited access to community services that provide information and support

Two perspectives on addressing literacy in a health context

"The words can only take you so far. It is the experience of being in health care and coming up against that literacy issue that makes you experience and understand it, but I could never put it into words."

Health Practitioner in rural Nova Scotia

"You don't know what you want... so how are they going to help you?... You feel uncomfortable and you don't know what to ask for... See we are kind of like blind folded... A lot of people, you know, can't read."

Rural Nova Scotian man with diabetes





- ❑ Identification of literacy as a community health concern
- ❑ Community development approach, partnership building and proposal development
- ❑ Personal interviews with 46 adults with low literacy and 20 key informants, 7 focus groups and 54 practitioners
- ❑ Report of findings *Taking Off the Blindfold: Seeing How Literacy Affects Health*
- ❑ Roundtables to share findings and prioritize actions
- ❑ Presentations to key decision-makers

Funded by the Social Science and Humanities Research Council -
National Literacy Secretariat Valuing Literacy in Canada Program

Knowledge Transfer: District Response

District Health Authority

- Increase awareness of literacy as a determinant of health among service providers (funded by NSDH Health Primary Health Care Transition)
 - Environmental scan of best practices & policies
 - District-wide sessions for providers on findings
 - Health literacy policy
 - Health literacy environmental assessment tool
 - Health literacy network



Community Literacy Programs

- Richmond County Literacy Network's Seniors health literacy project: Bringing Health Literacy Home to Richmond County (funded by National Literacy Secretariat)

Knowledge Transfer: Provincial Response

Nova Scotia Provincial Health Literacy Initiative

- Provincial stakeholder consultation- December 2004
- Launch of Nova Scotia Health Literacy Initiative - April, 2005
 - ***Literacy and Health: Making the Connection*** DVD produced by the NS Depts of Health and Education.
- May 15, 2006. Provincial workshop
- Steering Committee - Intersectoral Health Literacy Strategy for NS - current

NATIONAL COLLABORATING CENTRE

Determinants of Health

- ❑ One of 6 NCCs funded by PHAC
- ❑ Hosted by Atlantic Consortium at St Francis Xavier University
- ❑ Mission: to engage the participation of researchers, policy-makers, health practitioners and the public in moving knowledge about the broad determinants of health into policy and practices to achieve social justice and health for all.
- ❑ First priority for knowledge synthesis, translation and exchange (KSTE) activities is *literacy* as a determinant of health and *health literacy* as it relates to advancing public health practice and policy.

Some KSTE activities of NCC-DH

- Collaborating with CPHA in timely knowledge synthesis work of the Expert Panel on Health Literacy
 - Scan of evaluated interventions (King, 2006)
 - Atlantic consultations on Panel recommendations
 - National consultation and dissemination of report findings and recommendations

- National GIS mapping of determinants of health beginning with literacy and health literacy
- Practitioners dialogues to determine health literacy contexts within PH practice and to identify KSTE needs & opportunities
- Health module for the national Family Literacy Foundational Program with Edmonton Centre for Family Literacy

- Guided by Working Group with expertise across disciplines related to literacy and health literacy

Current National Initiatives

- ❑ National Literacy and Health Program
- ❑ CPHA Resources (Guide for plain language for seniors; Health communication training package for health professionals; workshop guide for youth on safety and violence; reports on literacy and health including one on health literacy and Chronic Disease Prevention; Clear Language Service)
- ❑ Movement for Canadian Literacy (MCL)
- ❑ Fédération canadienne pour l'alphabétisation en français (FCAF)
- ❑ The Healthy Aboriginal Network
- ❑ Canadian Council on Learning Knowledge Centre on Health and Learning
- ❑ CAPC and CPNP
- ❑ PHAC funded National Collaborating Centre on Determinants of Health

Current Provincial Initiatives

- ❑ Health Literacy Network (B.C.)
- ❑ Health Literacy Research Team (B.C.)
- ❑ The Literacy Audit Kit (Alberta)
- ❑ “It’s Safe to Ask” Project (Manitoba)
- ❑ Literacy and Health Project (Manitoba)
- ❑ To be Born Equal-To Grow to Health Program (Quebec)
- ❑ Healthy-Weight Intervention project (Quebec)
- ❑ Literacy and Health Project (Quebec Centre for Literacy)
- ❑ Health Literacy in Rural Nova Scotia Research Project & provincial intersectoral initiative (NS)
- ❑ Promoting Literacy in Healthy Public Policy (PEI)

Current Local Initiatives

- ❑ Health and Literacy Committee, Prince Albert Saskatchewan
- ❑ Health benefits of literacy project, READ Saskatoon
- ❑ Alphabet Soup, Winnipeg
- ❑ Community Health Assessment, Brandon
- ❑ Diabetes Management project, Ottawa
- ❑ Literacy and Health project, North Bay
- ❑ Patient Education project, Hamilton
- ❑ Montreal Hospital project
- ❑ “Do I Need to See the Doctor?”, Guysborough Antigonish Strait Health Authority, Nova Scotia

Effectiveness of existing interventions in relation to Health Literacy (Hauser & Edwards, 2006)

- ❑ Few rigorous evaluations of interventions to improve health literacy
- ❑ Simplifying reading material using clear language and pictures is most widespread initiative...yet no evidence that it improves health outcomes
- ❑ Although multimedia presentations may improve knowledge of both the literate and the less literate, they do not appear to change health-related behaviours
- ❑ Community development is a promising avenue as is participatory research
- ❑ Healthcare system change to facilitate its use by the less literate is an important initiative

Effectiveness of existing interventions

- ❑ Overall, few health literacy interventions evaluated for effectiveness in improving health literacy (King, 2007)
- ❑ There appears to be some evidence from both American interventions as well as Canadian interventions that using participatory education methods results in improvement in most aspects of health literacy

Draft Recommendation of the Expert Panel on Health Literacy

Rationale

The magnitude of the problems of low literacy and low health literacy in Canada, and their significant impacts on individual and family life, communities and service systems, most particularly the health system, requires and merits a comprehensive, coordinated national strategy that addresses the challenges we face today.

The Expert Panel on Health Literacy therefore recommends that a Pan-Canadian Strategy on Health Literacy be developed, funded and implemented to address nine key components.

Components of a Pan-Canadian Strategy on Health Literacy

-  **Improve Literacy in Canada**
-  **Increase Public Awareness**
-  **Change Professional Education**
-  **Improve Health Communications**
-  **Move to Integrated Interventions**
-  **Do the Research**
-  **Ensure Program Funding and Evaluation**
-  **Develop Capacity**
-  **Implement the Strategy**

What should be done across all levels of public health?

- ❑ Commit to addressing literacy, particularly as it relates to health
- ❑ Form stronger links with the literacy community
- ❑ Support the development of research on literacy and health literacy
- ❑ Enable the transfer of evidence to change practice and policy
- ❑ Advocate for more attention to literacy and health literacy by politicians and other decision-makers
- ❑ Audit operations in terms of literacy demands and address the health literacy issues that arise

What are potential roles and opportunities for PHAC and HC?

- Potential roles
 - Collaborative leadership?
 - Improve awareness ?
 - Leverage interest and support for action?
 - Other?
- Opportunities
 - National Collaborating Centres?
 - International connections?
 - Regional offices?
 - Relationship with CPHA?
 - Other?

Where do we go from here?

- Finalize Health Literacy Panel Report
- Hold National Consultation
- Release Panel Report
- Other suggestions?

