

HEALTH AND LEARNING

Knowledge Centre

Addressing Health Literacy at National, Provincial and Local Levels: Implications for Community Health

Irving Rootman, Ph.D., Executive Director, Health and Learning Knowledge Centre, University of Victoria

Presentation at Re-Imagining Health Services Conference

November 7, 2008

Vancouver, British Columbia

Outline

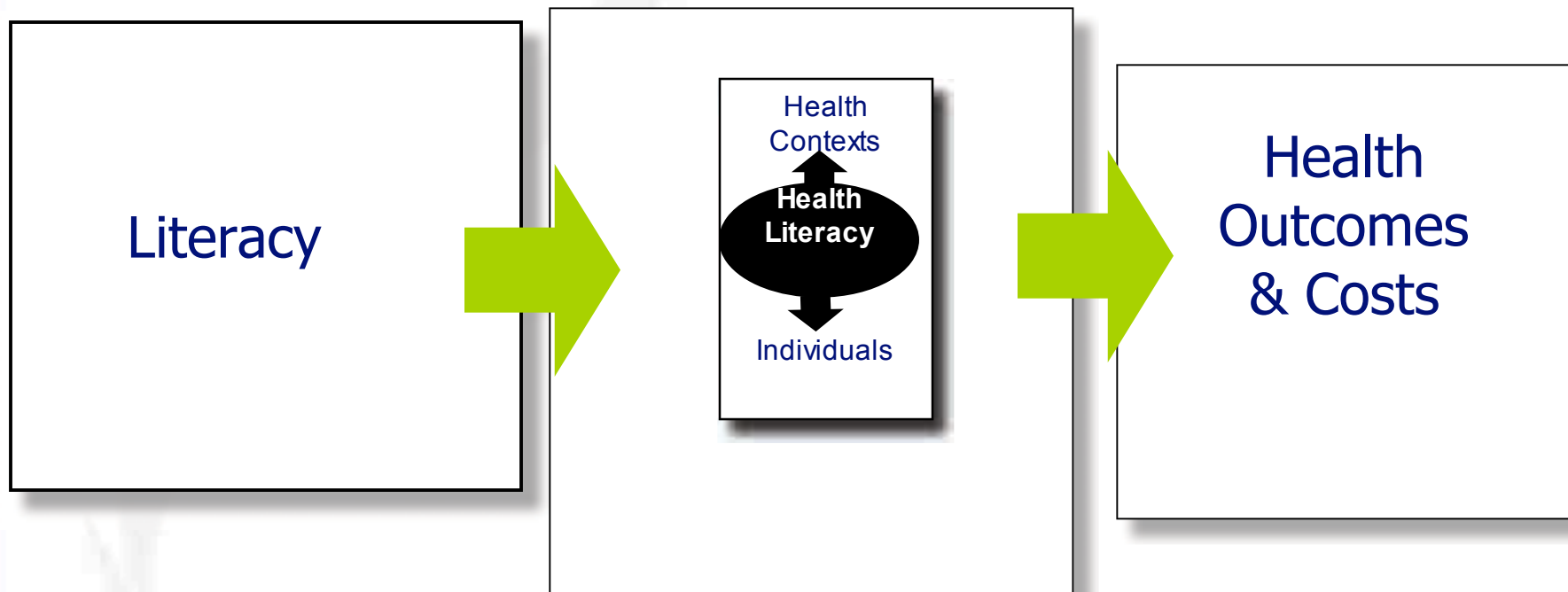
- **What is health literacy?**
- **A Vision of a health literate Canada**
- **Barriers to a health literate Canada**
- **Innovations in addressing health literacy at National, Provincial and Local levels**
- **Implications for community health services**

U.S. Institute of Medicine Definition of Health Literacy

- 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)



Canadian Expert Panel on Health Literacy Definition

- the ability to access, understand, evaluate and communicate information as a way to promote, maintain and improve health in a variety of settings across the life-course (Rootman and Gordon-El-Bihbety, 2008).



European Definition

- **“the capacity to make sound health decisions in the context of everyday life – at home, in the community, at the workplace, in the health care system, the marketplace and the political arena” (Kickbusch, 2007)**
- **“Health literacy is active citizenship: a critical empowerment strategy in modern society – a significant dimension of citizen, consumer and patient’s rights” (Kickbusch, 2007)**

Vision of a Health Literate Canada

All people in Canada have the capacity, opportunities and support they need to obtain and use health information effectively, to act as informed partners in the care of themselves, their families and communities, and to manage interactions in a variety of settings that affect health and well-being (Rootman and Gordon El-Bihbety, 2008)



HEALTH AND LEARNING

Knowledge Centre

A health literate Canada would have:

- **National, provincial, territorial, Aboriginal and local governments that provide people with opportunities to develop and improve health literacy throughout the life course**
- **Comprehensive policies and programs to reduce inequities in health literacy and health care access among Canadians**
- **Collaborative efforts by the health, social service and education systems and by the governmental, not-for-profit and private sectors to promote and facilitate health literacy**
- **A culturally-relevant and respectful approach to delivering health services and information**
- **Clear information about health and the operation of services and systems that affect health in a variety of languages**
- **Policies and incentives to encourage service providers and educators to facilitate health literacy in their interactions with clients, students, other community members and patients**
- **Individuals with the confidence, support and skills they need to promote and advocate for the health of themselves, their families and communities.**

HEALTH AND LEARNING

Knowledge Centre

Individual Barriers include:

- Declines associated with aging
- Low levels of formal education
- Lack of knowledge and skills about health
- Mother tongue other than English or French
- Disabilities
- Social stigma



HEALTH AND LEARNING Knowledge Centre

System barriers include:

- **Lack of stimulation and learning opportunities in early childhood**
- **Challenges in implementing quality school health and physical education programs**
- **Lack of affordable Second Language programs and community-based literacy upgrading programs**
- **Inadequate workplace training and education**
- **Confusing or conflicting health information from the media and the Internet**
- **Complex health systems**
- **Demanding self-care regimes for chronic diseases**
- **Lack of awareness and knowledge about health literacy among health and literacy professionals**



Addressing Individual Barriers

Declines in health literacy associated with aging might be addressed by:

- **More emphasis on lifelong learning**
- **Practicing reading and writing skills daily**
- **Increasing opportunities to learn about health and developing literacy skills in the community**
- **More workplace health and skill development programs**
- **Providing outreach to seniors who are isolated and/or have disabilities**



HEALTH AND LEARNING Knowledge Centre

Low levels of formal education/lack of knowledge and skills about health might be addressed by:

- Increasing financial support for pursuing higher levels of education at all ages
- Establishing policies and programs to prevent school drop-out
- Introducing comprehensive school health programs that include health literacy



HEALTH AND LEARNING

Knowledge Centre

Having a mother tongue other than English or French might be addressed by:

- **Second-language programs that incorporate health information and skill building**
- **Culturally-appropriate health and social services**
- **Cultural competence training for practitioners**
- **Greater use of interpretation and social support services in health care settings**
- **Culturally relevant health information and translation**
- **Greater use of health professionals from ethno-cultural communities in health care settings**



HEALTH AND LEARNING Knowledge Centre

Disabilities that affect proficiency in health literacy might be addressed by:

- **Increasing support for persons with disabilities to stay in school and to attend literacy and education programs in the community**
- **Providing affordable vision and hearing aids and tailored health materials.**



HEALTH AND LEARNING Knowledge Centre

Stigma might be addressed by:

- Improving the awareness and sensitivity of health professionals regarding the impact of stigma on the behaviours of people with low literacy and health literacy
- Increasing the skills of health professionals in recognizing low literacy and health literacy skills levels
- Raising public awareness about stigma associated with low literacy and health literacy and that most people experience some difficulties in understanding health materials.



Addressing Systemic Barriers

Lack of stimulation and learning opportunities in early childhood might be addressed by:

- **Increased support for initiatives in early childhood development, education and care**
- **Broader access to parenting programs and adult literacy**
- **More family literacy programs**
- **Improving parents' health literacy and their understanding of early development, in particular, for newcomers and minority groups**



HEALTH AND LEARNING Knowledge Centre

Barriers to health literacy in schools might be addressed by:

- **A comprehensive school health approach including a range of activities and services, in schools and surrounding communities.**



HEALTH AND LEARNING Knowledge Centre

Barriers in the community might be addressed by:

- **Providing affordable programs in English or French as a Second Language or literacy upgrading**
- **Increasing the number and quality of these programs**
- **Including health-related information and skills in these programs**



HEALTH AND LEARNING Knowledge Centre

Barriers in the workplace might be addressed by:

- **Introducing more comprehensive workplace programs with literacy and health literacy components**



HEALTH AND LEARNING Knowledge Centre

Confusing, hard-to-understand health messages and information overload in the media and on the Internet might be addressed by:

- **Developing plain language materials with input from target audiences**
- **Evaluating the effectiveness of Web sites and communication material**



HEALTH AND LEARNING Knowledge Centre

Barriers in the health care system might be addressed by:

- Increasing skill building and sensitive, culturally-appropriate communications
- Providing paid or volunteer interpreters or “client advocates” (health brokers)
- Encouraging patients to ask questions and to express their feelings, preferences and values about health-related concerns
- Listening to patients carefully and taking time to clearly explain risks, research and treatment options
- Talking to patients slowly, using simple words, showing respect
- Telephone follow-ups within one week.



HEALTH AND LEARNING Knowledge Centre

Lack of awareness of health and literacy professionals regarding health literacy might be addressed by:

- **Wide dissemination of Expert Panel and other reports on health literacy**
- **Public campaigns to raise awareness**
- **Articles in journals read by health and education professionals**
- **Continuing education programs.**



HEALTH AND LEARNING Knowledge Centre

Lack of knowledge about health literacy among health professionals might be addressed by:

- **Including health literacy in college and university curricula, continuing education and professional development activities for health care providers**



Current Canada-Wide HL Initiatives

- CPHA Literacy and Health Program
- CAPC and CPNP
- Movement for Canadian Literacy (MCL)
- Fédération canadienne pour l'alphabétisation en français (FCAF)
- Canadian Alliance on Mental Illness and Mental Health
- Canadian Council on Learning
- National PHAC Collaborating Centre on Determinants of Health



Current Province-wide Initiatives:

- Health Literacy Network (B.C.)
- Mental Health Literacy Network (B.C.)
- Healthy Aboriginal Network (B.C.)
- Health Literacy Research Team (B.C.)
- COSCO Health Literacy Project (B.C.)
- Healthy living performance standards for Schools (B.C.)
- “It’s Safe to Ask” Project (Manitoba)
- Literacy and Health Project (Manitoba)
- Promoting Literacy in Healthy Public Policy (PEI)
- Nova Scotia Health Literacy Initiative
- Discussion paper for Inuit communities on literacy and health (Nunavut)
- Health Check (N.W.T.)



Current Local Initiatives:

- **Hispanic Health Literacy Video Project, Vancouver**
- **Farsi-speaking T.V. series on Health, Vancouver**
- **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**
- **Naître égaux – Grandir en santé, Quebec**
- **Montreal Hospital project**



HEALTH AND LEARNING Knowledge Centre

Key Recommendation

- *That a comprehensive, coordinated, cooperative and integrated Pan-Canadian Strategy on Health Literacy be developed, funded and implemented to improve the level of health literacy in Canada, and the extent to which people receive the support they need to cope with the health literacy demands they encounter*



(Rootman and Gordon-El-Bihbety, 2008)

HEALTH AND LEARNING

Knowledge Centre

Promising Approaches :

- **Develop and undertake a coordinated multi-media campaign to increase awareness of the issue of health literacy in Canada**
- **Integrate health literacy into curricula from primary and secondary education through to adult education and seek resources for doing so**
- **Make health literacy a mandatory component of service provider curricula, professional continuing education, and professional registration and certification**
- **Develop policies on use of plain/clear language and visual symbols in health communications, guidelines and prototypes including accreditation standards for health communications and interactions**
- **undertake assessments/audits of accessibility of service provision systems and institutions as well as health services accreditation**

(Rootman and Gordon-El-Bihbety, 2008)

HEALTH AND LEARNING

Knowledge Centre

Promising Approaches (Cont.) :

- **Set population-specific targets for health literacy, monitor and report progress**
- **Develop pertinent funding streams to address health literacy research and programming**
- **Develop mechanisms to coordinate federal, provincial and territorial and Aboriginal governments' policy and program delivery to promote health literacy across the life span (e.g. Council on Health Literacy)**
- **Develop mechanisms to evaluate health literacy interventions, allocate adequate funding, and disseminate the findings**
- **Develop a parallel process to the one undertaken in producing this report by Aboriginal organizations and people**

(Rootman and Gordon-El-Bihbety, 2008)

HEALTH AND LEARNING Knowledge Centre

Helpful Resources for Health Literacy

- **National Literacy and Health Program Materials and Services** [www.cpha.ca/en/programs/literacy.aspx]
- **Writing Health Information for Patients and Families** [PatientEducation@hpsc.ca]
- **Family Literacy and Health Module** [www.nald.ca/library/research/familthea/first.htm]
- **Health Literacy Maps** [www.ccl-cca.ca/cclflash/healthliteracy/]
- **Literacy Audit Tool Kit** [www.literacyalberta.ca]
- **The Health Literacy Environment of Hospitals and Health Centers** [www.bcsall.net]
- **Pharmacy Health Literacy Assessment Tool** [www.ahrq.gov]
- **Health Literacy Manuals for Clinicians** [www.ama-assn.org]
- **Health and Literacy Discussion List** [www.nifl.gov/lincs/discussions/subscribe_all.html]

Implications for Community Health Sector

- **Health literacy is a concept that could be useful in the community health sector**
- **There are models and resources that can be adapted to community health organizations for addressing health literacy**
- **It is critical to collaborate with other sectors**
- **There are opportunities to do so**

HEALTH AND LEARNING Knowledge Centre

Questions for Discussion

- **Do you agree with the vision of a health literate Canada?**
- **How could we implement such a vision in British Columbia?**
- **What is the role of the community health sector?**

References

Institute of Medicine. (2004). *Health Literacy: A Prescription to End Confusion*. Washington, D.C.: National Academies Press. Available at www.iom.edu

Kickbusch, I. (2007). Invest in Health literacy: enabling choices for health in modern societies, Presentation at IUHPE Conference, Vancouver, British Columbia, June 14. Available at www.ccl-cca.ca

Rootman, I. & Gordon-El-Bihbety, D. (2008). *A Vision for a Health Literate Canada*, Ottawa: CPHA. Available at www.cpha.ca

HEALTH AND LEARNING Knowledge Centre

To Contact me:

- irootman@uvic.ca

