



Health Literacy and the Justice System

What is health literacy and why is it important?

Health literacy is about people having enough knowledge, understanding, skills and confidence to use health information, to be active partners in their care, and to navigate health and social care systems.

Health literacy requires a complex group of reading, listening, analytical, and decision-making skills, as well as the ability to apply these skills to health situations. For example, it includes the ability to understand instructions on prescriptions, appointment letters, leaflets, directions from a practitioner and the ability to negotiate complex health care systems.

Those of us with lower levels of health literacy:

- are generally 1.5 to 3 times more likely to experience a given poor outcome
- have poorer health status and self-reported health
- wait until we're sicker before we go to the doctor
- find it harder to access services appropriate to our needs
- find it harder to understand labelling and take medication as directed
- are less able to communicate with healthcare professionals and take part in decisions
- are less likely to engage with health promotional activities, such as influenza vaccination and breast screening
- are at increased risk of developing multiple health problems
- have higher rates of avoidable and emergency admissions
- have higher risks of hospitalisation and longer in-patient stays
- have difficulty managing our own health and wellbeing, that of our children, and of anyone else we care for
- have greater difficulty looking after ourselves when we have long-term conditions

Some population groups have been identified as experiencing disproportionately low or inadequate health literacy. These are:

- more disadvantaged socioeconomic groups
- migrants and people from ethnic minorities
- older people
- people with long-term health conditions
- disabled people (including those who have long-term physical, mental, intellectual or sensory impairment)

Health literacy therefore contributes to health inequalities because the population groups most at risk of low health literacy are also known to have the poorest health outcomes.

Links between health literacy and the justice system

Individuals involved in the justice system have been shown to be affected by a disproportionately higher number of health conditions than the general population. This includes chronic health conditions, such as diabetes, heart disease and hypertension, and infectious diseases, hepatitis, and sexually transmitted diseases. This picture is often compounded by mental health problems and problematic drug and alcohol use.

We are seeing an increasingly ageing justice population, which brings a particular set of challenges for providing health and social care, both during a custodial sentence, upon liberation and whilst being managed in the community. Levels of trauma and adverse childhood experiences are also higher within justice populations, which increases the likelihood of a range of health issues.

Both prisons and community justice services will spend a considerable amount of time supporting individuals with co-morbidities of health conditions, mental health problems and problematic drug and alcohol use.

Levels of both general literacy and numerical literacy are lower within the justice-experienced population, which can make it harder for individuals to self-manage any physical or mental health problems they may have.

The nature of the provision health and social care whilst serving a custodial sentence can also make it harder for individuals to make the transition to self-management after returning to the community. Many will require on-going support and detailed planning arrangements to be made in advance of liberation.

Improving health literacy and health outcomes

Health literacy is an important empowerment tool that has the potential to reduce health inequalities. This is because:

- the population groups most at risk of low health literacy are also known to have the poorest health outcomes
- health literacy plays a larger role among those with lower education than among those with higher education, in terms of health outcomes

There is also evidence that improved health literacy can:

- build resilience
- reduce disease severity
- improve mental health
- increase health knowledge
- improve adherence to medical instruction
- promote healthy lifestyle changes
- improve engagement and involvement in health
- improve confidence and self-esteem
- empower people to effectively manage long-term conditions

What can be done?

E-learning:

- NES module on Health Literacy: <https://learn.nes.nhs.scot/26672/health-literacy>
- Public Health Scotland module on links between health literacy and health inequalities <http://www.healthscotland.scot/learning-resources/the-link-between-health-literacy-and-health-inequalities>

Further reading:

- Health Literacy Place website: <http://www.healthliteracyplace.org.uk/>
- Scottish Government Health Literacy Action Plan: <https://www.gov.scot/publications/making-easier-health-literacy-action-plan-scotland-2017-2025/>