

This information sheet is second in a series of nine, which cover three elements towards understanding and achieving health literacy. It aims to enhance health literacy practice for health professionals in the clinical environment.



assumptions in the communication encounter

Understand the different factors influencing clients accessing and utilising health care.

why is it important to consider assumptions when we communicate?

Both clients and health professionals have pre-existing assumptions that they bring with them when they communicate in the health service environment. Assumptions and preconceptions are a result of culture, background and experience. Health outcomes for the client are influenced by these assumptions. Understanding these factors can strengthen communication with clients and improve access, use and engagement with health services.

Individual factors

A number of inter-related client factors impact on the communication encounter. These include:

- The social determinants of health of each client - e.g. socio-economic status; education; religion
- The knowledge a client has - e.g. of the health system, of their illness and how their body works
- The skills a client has - e.g. literacy, numeracy, cognitive
- Cultural beliefs and values
- Experiences that the client has had, particularly past experiences of the health system and the service provider

Service provider factors

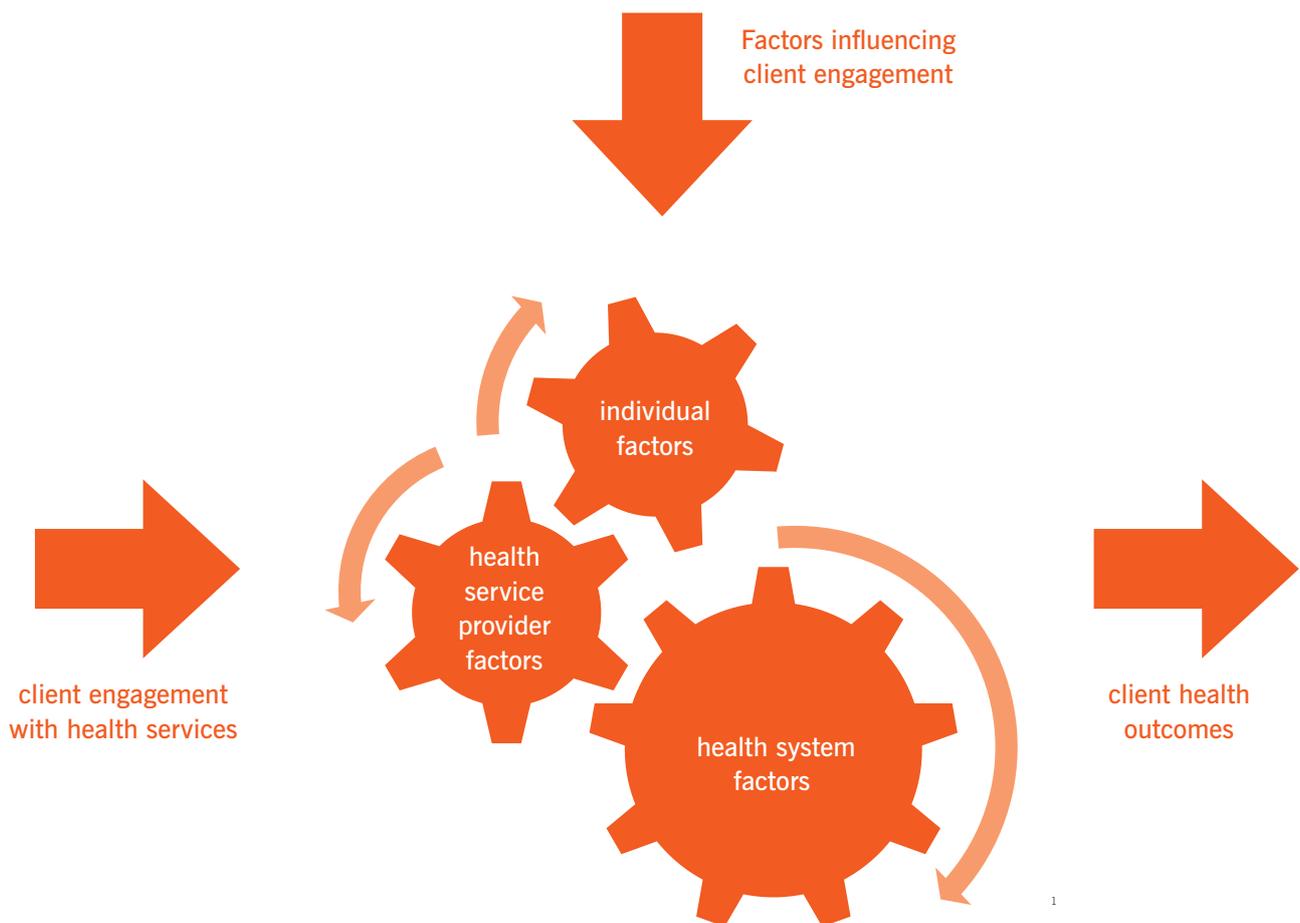
Both health professionals and the services they work for also impact on the communication encounter. Some of these factors include:

- The complexity of navigating the health service
- The level of skills of the health professional
- The individual backgrounds and experiences of the health professional
- Time allocated to client interaction by the health professional
- The services' commitment to client-centred care
- The existence of policies to build the capacity of staff
- Commitment by the service to appropriate communication tools - e.g. teach-back technique, plain language

Health system factors

When looking at health systems overall, key factors play a role in influencing the success of the health professional / client encounter, and contribute to a health literate environment. Included are:

- Federal and State government policies towards health literacy
- Health education as part of the overall education system
- Resources dedicated to a health literate health system
- Policies targeting social determinants of health that impact health literacy
- Focus on community health care versus individual centred models of health
- Support for the most vulnerable clients and communities within the health system



1. Adapted from Paasche-Orlow and Wolf, 2007. American Journal of Health Behaviour



Other information sheets in this series

1 - What is health literacy?

Individual health literacy

- 3 - Measuring health literacy
- 4 - Verbal communication
- 5 - Using the teach-back technique

Health service providers

- 6 - Planning, monitoring and evaluating for health literacy
- 7 - Supportive systems for health literacy

Health systems

- 8 - Written communication
- 9 - Social determinants of health and health literacy