written communication

Use different methods to improve written communication with individual clients and the community.

This information sheet is eighth in a series of nine, which cover three elements towards understanding and achieving health literacy. It aims to enhance health literacy within the health systems environment, for policy makers, and supports organisational practice.

why is written communication important?

Health information is an important part of health literacy. Clients and the community need to be able to access, understand and act on health information. A lot of health information is presented in a complex way, and is often in writing. This includes informed consent forms, public health notices and medical instructions.

It is common for clients and the community to have difficulties in accessing the vast range of information they need to act on[1]. The use of jargon and other technical language can intensify this difficulty. If a patient doesn't understand what they are reading, it can have a significant impact on their health, ranging from how they take their medication, or lack of informed consent.

Providing simplified and more attractive written materials helps increase client and community engagement. One way to make sure health information reflects culture and language is to have supportive policies on communication - e.g. plain language. This supports health organisations to account for health literacy in practice.

Improving written communication contributes to improving the relationship between clients, health professionals, health care organisations and systems. This improves a patient's active role in the management of their illness and their decision making abilities. This information sheet outlines some strategies to improve written communication.

Plain language

A plain language strategy makes written information easier to understand. It is one important tool for improving health literacy. The simple test of whether something is in plain language is when a client can find what they need, understand it and then use it, the first time they read it.

Key things to consider when writing in plain language are:

- Make the most important point first
- Break down complicated information into small parts
- Use simple language; avoid jargon
- Define all technical terms
- Use formats that are easy to read
- Use the active voice

Make sure you test your materials for understandability.

Readability

To make sure most people can understand written information, adopt a uniform reading level somewhere between Grade 4-6. There are also 'readability' assessment tools on the Internet to check documents, but the best test involves a sample of your target audience.

Readability is more than just the words you use. Points to consider are:

- Use large or bold text (e.g. 12 point +)
- Allow for white space
- Keep line spacing in mind
- Don't use different fonts, stick to one clear font
- Keep the message short
- Test for understanding
- Use pictures that are culturally appropriate
- Use colours to enhance but not complicate the document

Glossary of terms

There is so much medical jargon in the written information patients receive, it can be difficult to understand it all. Including a plain language glossary for medical terms can help the patient understand the information and make appropriate decisions about their illness.

Good practice example

A community health centre is developing an information kit that provides clients and the community with information on the services the centre provides. They employ the plain language approach when writing the document and then test the draft with a sample of their clients during a community BBQ. The information kit is then re-drafted to include suggestions from clients, including clearer maps, and simpler language around available services.

---

1. Department of Health, *Health literacy: enabling communication and participation in health: Background paper*, State Government of Victoria, 2013.