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Ethical Issues: Communication and Prevention

We think we do a good job explaining things to our patients, but truth be told, studies find that patients forget up to 80% of the health information we give them by the time they leave the clinic or office, and half of what they do remember is incorrect. No wonder medication error and noncompliance are so prevalent.

Health illiteracy is a serious and growing problem in this country. According to the Institute of Medicine (IOM) nearly half of all American adults (that's 90 million people) have difficulty understanding and using health information, and there is a higher rate of hospitalization and use of emergency services by patients with limited health literacy.¹ Limited health literacy may lead to billions of dollars in avoidable health care costs. More than a measurement of reading skill, health literacy includes competency in writing, listening, speaking, arithmetic, and conceptual understanding. Health literacy is defined as the degree to which individuals have the capacity to obtain, process, and understand basic information about services needed in order to make appropriate decisions regarding their health based on that information.

At some point almost everyone encounters health information they cannot understand. Even well educated people with strong reading and writing skills may have trouble comprehending medical jargon, complicated medical forms, or their doctor's instructions regarding a drug or procedure. How many times have we heard even the most well educated of our patients ask the nurse as they are leaving the clinic, "Now, what was it she told me to do?" Even when (we feel) adequate time is taken and a concerted effort is made to explain well and in detail, the complexity and apprehension of the situation often places barriers to the effectiveness of our message in terms of hearing and understanding. Add to that poor reading skill, cultural differences, and language barriers and the chasm between information and understanding widens further. Effective communication and understanding is of particular importance when considering health maintenance and disease prevention for populations of patients at risk, but for whom the acuity of need for health services is less transparent because illness has not yet occurred.

The IOM reports that nearly half of all cause mortality in the United States is linked to social and behavioral factors such as smoking, diet, alcohol use, sedentary lifestyle, and accidents. Yet, less than five percent of the approximately \$1 trillion spent annually on healthcare in the United States is devoted to preventing preventable illness. Communication interventions intended to affect health behavior are an increasingly important strategy for improving the health of the American people. However, effective communication is highly dependent upon the social and cultural milieu that shapes the lives, language, and beliefs of high risk recipients who need preventive services. Because

we live in an increasingly diverse nation, it is important to understand more fully how these different messages should be constructed and delivered and develop strategies to fulfill that need. The IOM, in partnership with the American College of Physicians and other professional groups, is working to address the challenge of improving health communications and literacy in our racially and culturally diverse society.ⁱⁱ Although messages tailored to specific audiences can be effective, the IOM has also identified the difficulty and complexity of categorizing audiences.ⁱⁱⁱ

The Institute of Medicine is encouraging providers, health care organizations, public health systems, education systems, the media, and health care consumers to work individually and in unison to improve health literacy in this country. If patients at all educational levels, and within all cultural groups cannot comprehend needed health information, attempts to improve healthcare quality, reduce health care costs, and eliminate disparity may be doomed. The individual efforts of health care providers are critical to this effort. Bridging the communication gap must begin at the bedside, one patient at a time, using the time and resources available, while at once striving to improve the system in which those resources and services are provided.

The great leveler is that illness is unavoidable, and the reality that everyone will eventually need to navigate increasingly complicated healthcare systems, usually at a time when most vulnerable; universal access to adequate information and effective understanding is the key to a successful voyage.

ⁱ Institute of Medicine. *Health Literacy: A Prescription to End Confusion*. 2004

ⁱⁱ ACP and IOM. Moving Forward to Improve Health Literacy National Conference. October 26-27, 2004. National Academy of Sciences, Washington, DC.

ⁱⁱⁱ Institute of Medicine. *Speaking of Health: Assessing Health Communication Strategies for Diverse Populations*. 2003