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Knowledge of Health Literacy in an Academic Health Center

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Introduction:

Nearly one-half of all American adults are considered low literate and have difficulty understanding and acting upon health information. Increased cost to provide care for people with inadequate health literacy has been estimated to be between $130 and $173 billion. Recent studies suggest that health care providers overestimate the literacy abilities of patients and that a significant portion of these patients may not have the skills to effectively self-manage their health care. Through this study, we sought to measure knowledge levels of the impact of low health literacy on both the healthcare system and the individual.

Method(s):

Two hundred and thirty individuals (health care professionals and students) attending a university sponsored presentation on health literacy were invited to complete the Low-Literacy Impact Survey immediately before participating in the offering.

Results:

Preliminary findings indicate that overall health literacy knowledge levels between various groups (nursing, dentistry, medicine, students) did not vary significantly. Participants were most knowledgeable of risk factors for low health literacy, resource utilization and the relationship between literacy and health status. Participants were least knowledgeable about the prevalence of low health literacy and cost to the system.

Discussion:

For optimal healthcare system and individual outcomes, the ability of patients to understand and implement measures to maintain and/or improve their health status is clear. However, the patient's ability to do this is dependent upon receiving instruction in a format that can be understood. Healthcare providers need to be able to identify individuals at risk for low literacy and to then implement actions when needed. Information obtained from this study can be used to empirically identify areas of need in regard to developing interventions.
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