



Health literacy – still the missing link to better wellness.

Dr Selwyn Hodge, Co-Chair, Self-care Forum and Adviser to Well North, looks at the vital role of health literacy in boosting wellbeing.

Many of us sometimes use the expression 'Look after yourself' when taking our leave from someone; but to be really helpful, we should consider whether they actually have the capacity or willingness to do so.

As we progress from being babies, through school and teenage years, into adulthood, hopefully we all have the opportunities to gain the knowledge, skills and determination to look after ourselves effectively, since this is a key characteristic shared by most other living organisms. However, all the evidence suggests that too many people don't and can't.

While we all respond naturally to life's fundamental needs of eating and drinking, and react to painful stimuli etc, we are not necessarily that good at protecting our own health and looking after our bodies' wellbeing.

The move away from self-care

Given the relatively advanced state of medical science today, it is worrying therefore that self-care in the UK is often less well established now than it was several decades ago.

Why is this? Well, although this response won't be very popular, primarily because of the provision of universal healthcare, free at the point of access, which has led the majority of us to assume that we don't need to worry over much about protecting our health. If we have any problems with our bodies, we can just go and see somebody for a solution.

This idealistic situation would perhaps be a reasonable state of affairs, if we restricted any visits to a GP or to A&E to just serious or life threatening conditions. In fact, the evidence strongly suggests that many of the visits that do take place are for largely trivial matters, which we could quickly address ourselves through simple treatments and a basic knowledge of first aid.

Statistics obtained by the Self-care Forum a few years ago showed how serious this problem actually was:

- There were 51 million GP consultations each year just involving minor ailments, which individuals could have dealt with themselves or by obtaining simple remedies from a pharmacist.
- Indeed 18 per cent of a GP's workload was accounted for by minor ailments.
- Nearly half the consultations were generated by 16 - 59 year olds.
- Treatment of minor ailments within primary care incurred significant costs to the NHS of £2 billion a year.

- 80 per cent of costs were for GPs' time, equating to £1.5 billion a year, and on average over an hour a day for every GP.
- Over 91 per cent of all minor ailment consultations resulted in a prescription at a cost of £371 million.

While the growth of the National Health Service has until recently led to improving levels of healthcare in this country, it has unintentionally assisted a devastating decline in health literacy levels among the UK population. Of greatest concern, is that if this trend is not reversed, it is conceivable that the costs to the nation will continue to escalate until they become unsustainable.

Causes and impact of poor health literacy

It should not be assumed though that poor health literacy is simply synonymous with poor educational attainment. It is known that even people with strong literacy skills can face health literacy challenges; for instance:

- when they are not familiar with medical terms, or how their bodies work
- when they have to interpret numbers, or risks, to make a health care decision
- when they are diagnosed with a serious illness and are scared or confused
- when they have complex conditions that require complicated self-care.

Why are the levels of health literacy now so poor? Firstly, because parents are less able to pass on simple health and treatment messages to their children, compared with the family support that was available 50 years ago. Secondly, because the provision of health education in schools has declined enormously over the same period, with most teachers now not having the confidence, knowledge or time to cover topics in this area effectively.

Low levels of health literacy not only reduce people's ability to self-care, but also result in individuals not knowing who best to refer to if they do have a problem; population wide knowledge about the workings of the NHS is poor. In addition, many people often find difficulty communicating effectively with the health professionals they consult, and don't then make best use of the advice they are offered.

GPs often report that much of their consultation time is taken up in providing simple health education messages and ensuring their patients know exactly what to do.

A problem that I have written about elsewhere, relates to a phenomenon that I have referred to as 'healthipedia' (*). While many individuals have now become very adept at looking for information about health problems on internet sites, unfortunately many of these people erroneously believe they have become immediate experts and act accordingly. Something health professionals have become only too aware of, as patients become more neurotic about having the worst possible diagnoses for their often trivial conditions.

Poor levels of health literacy have also meant that information systems have now become today's educational quick fixes, with many individuals being misled into believing that all they need to know is where and how to find out about something, and that the exact solution will then be available. However, since they often fail sufficiently to comprehend and internalise the information provided, it remains largely inaccessible to them and frequently inappropriate.

Although good information can provide a valuable addition to pre-existing knowledge and understanding, it is not a successful learning resource in its own right, nor is it retained effectively.

Benefits of increased health literacy

So the argument I am making is that the need for effective health literacy remains paramount if we are to 'look after ourselves' properly.

A recent survey in the USA showed that only 12 percent of adults had proficient health literacy. Over a third - 77 million people - would have difficulty with common health tasks, such as following the directions on a prescription drug label or adhering to a childhood immunisation schedule.

Because the problems caused by an increasingly health illiterate population are becoming ubiquitous, there is no simple or quick solution. In the longer term, the situation will only improve if health education becomes a statutory and high status component of the school curriculum (ages 5-18) and is properly resourced – particularly with more effective teacher training.

In the immediate future though, health professionals need to be able to spend time working with local schools on this issue and to develop ways of helping their older patients gain at least some basic health skills and knowledge to pass on to future generations.

Local authorities can also support this approach through the work that their public health teams undertake with community groups: focussing in on healthy lifestyles, social prescribing and health literacy; and through their specialist health support activities, such as antenatal classes and parent and toddler groups.

The national Self-care Forum campaign began in 2010, in order to ensure that the issues around poor health literacy, and the lack of effective self-care, were brought to the attention of decision makers, and also to raise awareness among health professionals about possible ways forward. While the Forum has had some success through its annual conferences and the national self-care weeks it organises, which are becoming increasingly beneficial for those local health bodies that sign up, there is still far too much disparity between different parts of the country, contributing to the increasing levels of health and social inequalities.

Well North is now in a good position to support individuals and communities to look after themselves better. Improvements in people's health literacy, and their capacity to use health services more effectively and productively, go hand in hand with the intentions to create social and economic change and improved wellbeing in the Pathfinder areas.

The Self-care Forum and I hope that these messages resonate strongly with those seeking to improve people's lives. We will be most willing to provide any support we can to Well North Pathfinders in developing their capacity to improve the health of their populations.

(*) S J Hodge *Perspectives in Public Health* Vol 131 No 2 I