

Improving health literacy in education – why it is important we make the grade



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The years spent in education are some of the most important of your life. This is the time where you should learn the skills, knowledge and confidence to be able to care for yourself and others in the wider world. But despite the packed curriculums, there are concerns that young people leaving the education system are lacking the health literacy to help them do just that – look after themselves.

Health literacy is key in empowering people to confidently make healthy life choices. Without the ability to obtain, process and understand health materials, is it really surprising that people struggle to choose appropriate NHS services? How can we expect individuals to take steps to prevent long term conditions, or to know when to or when not to visit the GP, if they do not have the skills to confidently access or use health information or services?

So how big is this problem in the UK?

Well, recent research suggests that between 43% and 61% of the working population in England do not have the knowledge to understand and apply health information¹. In 2015 we know that an estimated 42% of 18-24 year olds were recurrent users of A&E, despite recent NHS campaigns aimed at reducing A&E attendance.

We also know that low health literacy has a significant negative impact on health. People with low levels of functional health literacy are more likely to lead unhealthy lifestyles, to suffer from long-term health conditions and have a higher mortality. It also affects a person's ability to confidently interact with NHS services or staff. This is of growing importance, with an ever-increasing emphasis on shared decision making and patient participation within the NHS. It is clear that people need functioning health literacy in order to make confident decisions about their own health.

This low level of health literacy has an impact on the NHS as well as the individual. It is estimated that the issue costs 3% to 5% of the annual UK health budget², with a £2.3 billion spend alone resulting from people using an inappropriate NHS service for their self treatable conditions³. With the growing pressure on NHS resources, it is clear we cannot afford to ignore this problem.

What can be done?

¹ <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC4370358/>

² <https://link.springer.com/article/10.1007%2Fs00038-009-0058-2>

³ IMS Health, Minor ailment workload in general practice, 2007

In order to tackle the issue, we must address the causes. The decline in health education in schools, and the reduction in health information being passed from parents to children are both key in cultivating the reduced levels of health literacy that we see today. We therefore must appreciate the importance in engaging young people with health education, both in school and at home. We must make use of these formative years to empower children and young adults with the skills and knowledge to be able to confidently control their own health, and to aid those around them. Introducing the concept of self care early on will help to embed it in the future.

This is by no means an easy task. As a long term goal, we must continue to lobby for health education to become a key component of the school curriculum. This is vital to allow us to effectively communicate self care information to children from an early age. However in the interim, we have seen initiatives that are successfully promoting the benefits of self care to young people. One campaign run by NHS Walsall CCG established effective collaboration with local schools and colleges, winning the Self Care Forum's Self Care Week Award 2016. Their initiative, including presentations, a debate and a social media activity engaged 362 15-24 year olds with self care.

Some Local Authorities, including Waltham Forest have also explored the adoption of Youth Health Champions as a method of sharing health knowledge between school peers. This is an interesting approach which promotes peer communication about health within schools to support the cascade of government health messaging. By encouraging these positive conversations between pupils, this can also result in teachers and parents becoming engaged with these important self care topics, in turn helping to increase their health literacy.

University is another excellent opportunity to engage young people with health information. For many, university may mean living away from home for the first time. With potential exposure to a range of unhealthy behaviours, it is important that students are confident in making healthy life choices.

Where in schools we can look to influence curriculums, this is clearly more of a challenge with universities. Instead we can focus efforts more on ensuring that student unions are engaging students, using resource and influence to share self care messages. Organised events and student media can help to drive communication of health information within student groups, offering skills and knowledge on how to control their health away from home.

Through this there is a chance to empower confidence. Confidence in knowing to visit a pharmacist for self treatable conditions such as coughs, colds, sprains or strains. Confidence to know how to cook healthy meals and to know what services are available if you feel that you cannot cope. Fostering this health confidence in young people is crucial in supporting the self care nation that we want to help build.

By empowering students both at school and at university to look after their health, we can help to promote good health literacy now and in the future. This year's Self Care Week (13-19 November) has the theme 'engaging and empowering people', and presents an ideal opportunity to engage with schools, colleges and universities in your area. Let us take action to support young people now, so that we can do our bit in helping to create a healthy and health literate society.