

Health Literacy: A New Dimension of Health Care

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DOI: 10.29322/IJSRP.10.06.2020.p10249

<http://dx.doi.org/10.29322/IJSRP.10.06.2020.p10249>

Abstract- Significant advancements have been witnessed in health care services over the years but there is always some kind of uncertainty associated with its adequate utilization. This uncertainty is primarily due to less or limited knowledge of medical health conditions and services among people. So, the concept of “HEALTH LITERACY” could come to the rescue of people and improve their knowledge to promote good health. The objective of this review is to identify the need and importance of Health Literacy and make an effort to highlight its effectiveness in improving the overall health outcomes.

Index Terms- Health Literacy, Health condition, prophylactic, self- management

I. INTRODUCTION

Having information about the health condition and utilizing that information discreetly for the management of health condition are two different things. Patients tend to have knowledge about their health condition from different sources but this may change their attitude about the gamut of disease. So, managing this information properly for the betterment of health condition is greatly needed.

Chronic illnesses have increased globally both in incidence and survival (1). To lower this risk of increasing illnesses, it has become imperative that people must be better informed from trusted sources about their health conditions so that they can make a better decision when it comes to health related issues and the concept of ‘Health Literacy’ is seemingly serving this purpose.

II. HEALTH LITERACY

The concept of “Health Literacy” is relatively a new concept and was introduced in the mid- seventies. It has been gaining relevance since then to the extent that evidences show it as the strongest predictor of a person’s health along with other social determinants such as age, income, educational level, etc.

Health literacy, basically, refers to the cognitive and social abilities that have a determining role in the motivation and capacity of the individual(s) to access, understand and use reliable information to promote and maintain their own health. It is directly associated with the decisions one makes about its own health.

& Importance of Health Literacy:

Health literacy has a widespread impact on health and well-being. It helps people to live healthier lives. Given the sustained increase in illnesses, health literacy has become one of the critical

factors in patient care. Many researchers have dedicated a series of researches to the concept of “Health Literacy” and after reviewing all these research papers, it was found that these researches have one common key finding, that is, “Health literacy is directly proportional to health condition”, which means, ‘Higher the level of Health literacy better will be the health condition of people and vice-versa’. Health literacy improves the competency of people to screen information and use it for maintenance of good health and reduce the life time risk of suffering from diseases including infections and even chronic diseases like cardiovascular disease, kidney disease, cancer, etc. In addition to this, if a patient is suffering from a particular kind of disease, health literacy guides in its proper management.

If it is intended, to improve the health of people and lower the incidence of disease and have better health outcomes then the concept of Health literacy becomes an inevitable and indispensable factor. In fact, studies from developed countries have reported that Health Literacy verily exhorts people to uptake preventive lifestyles and thus lower the prevalence of risk factors. It is also associated with early diagnosis and better management of chronic diseases and better long term treatment compliance (5, 6). So, health literacy promises effective engagement of people in health related activities to better the health outcomes.

In addition, Health Literacy helps to:

- Recognize signs and symptoms of disease/ illness.
- Make appropriate use of prophylactic (preventive) services including investigations, medication, etc.
- Seek medical advice at proper time.
- Self- reporting of disease.
- Perform self – management of disease, which includes;

Use of inhalers, oxygen concentrators, nebulizers, glucometer, etc. correctly.

- Ensure proper self-care including proper diet, hygiene, proper work conditions etc.
- Enrollment in health awareness campaigns, free screening health camps, etc.

Further, Health Literacy not only helps people in obtaining and retaining health information but also helps in developing better and adequate understanding of complex information about their health and health related issues. Therefore, it is particularly important to identify the need and importance of Health Literacy so that necessary actions and measures are taken to improve the health of people across the globe.

Some important measures to promote Health Literacy may include:

1. Facilitating face to face interaction between people and health care professionals by conducting awareness campaigns, health camps, etc.
2. Effective communication between patients and doctors, patients and nursing staff, patients and social workers, etc.
3. Health Literacy could also be promoted via videos, literature including articles, research papers etc.

Health Literacy with special reference to Cancer Patients:

Several researches have been conducted worldwide on Health Literacy among cancer patients. In these researches, Health Literacy in cancer patients has been promoted as one of the important strategies for delivering quality patient care and an important factor for prevention and control of cancer.

Regarding conceptual models on Health Literacy in cancer patients and its role in health outcomes, the work of Echeverri-et-al (7) stands out, they define, "Health Literacy as the ability of the individual to search, understand, evaluate and use basic information to take appropriate decisions regarding prevention, diagnosis and treatment of cancer." Among those with cancer diagnosis, Health Literacy may affect understanding of the diagnosis and associated treatment (9), thus affecting both the quality of life as well as the survival. Also, in oncology, increased survival, different forms of treatment and the management of their adverse effects make Health Literacy even more important factor in patient care.

Another research conducted on Health Literacy among Carcinoma Prostate patients has shown that how low Health Literacy is associated with 1.6 times higher odds of being diagnosed at a later stage of prostate cancer and having an .inadequate understanding of complex information about cancer (11, 12). This research has further discussed how patients with limited literacy obtain less information from cancer prevention and control materials and how less likely they are to be screened for disease, for example, a review of the literature has found that low Health Literacy is associated with a lower probability mammography screening (13,14). It has also been discussed that low Health Literacy may hinder cancer patients' ability to understand consent forms, follow medication directions and manage their disease (11,15,16). Keeping in view all this, the concept of Health Literacy in cancer patients has become indispensable. It has become indispensable for the fact that Health Literacy not only helps to keep down the risk of not following medication directions and proper management of disease but also helps to have a proper control over disease. Also, due to the fact that cancer is not directly observable, most of the times, and has a multi-dimensional nature (7), it becomes cardinal that cancer patients must have Health Literacy and are familiar with the medical context so that they can adhere to the prevention and treatment guidelines.

III. DISCUSSION

Health Literacy is a new dimension in health care. The aim of this review was to identify the role and impact of Health Literacy as a potential factor in health care. It included the studies that were conducted with an objective that supports the relevance of the concept of Health Literacy in improving the health outcomes. In the studies reviewed in this paper, it was observed that although the focus was primarily on Health Literacy but none of the articles have discussed it as a whole concept. There is limited information regarding the definition, need, importance and implications of Health literacy. In light of this, the aim of this review included to present a simplified elucidation of the concept of Health Literacy including its need, importance and implications.

IV. CONCLUSION

In an attempt, to pre-empt the people from encountering the risk of poor health, the understanding of the concept of Health Literacy needs to be strengthened. It has been gaining importance as one of the important factors in patient care. It has become one of the important predictors of health along with socio- economic status, education, etc. It may help people to lead a healthy life by reflecting the importance of adopting a healthier life-style in terms of diet, hygiene etc. Thus , also keeping a check on prevention and control measures of disease. So, it is important to invest in Health Literacy measures to combat the challenges posed by globally increasing incidences of illnesses.

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