Creating a Shame-Free and Patient-Centered Environment for those with Limited Literacy Skills

“Filling out forms, that’s my main problem. That’s why I bring somebody with me at all times.” (*Patient (1))

“I had some papers, but I didn’t know they were prescriptions and I walked around for a week without my medication. I was ashamed to go back to the doctor, but a woman saw the papers I had and told me they were prescriptions. It’s bad to not know how to read. After getting my medicine I had to come back and ask how to take them because I was urinating too much. They told me I was taking double the medication I was supposed to. I had two bottles and I was taking one from each bottle, but it turned out they were the same medication. But since I don’t know how to read, I didn’t know.” (*Patient (1))

Do you hear comments like these from your patients? How can we make sure that our patients feel supported and comfortable in any health care setting? There are a number of ways to create a more patient-friendly environment. As discussed earlier, patients with limited literacy are often ashamed of this problem and rarely tell anyone. Even patients with good literacy skills may feel intimidated and avoid asking questions, leading you to believe that they understand your instructions.

One of the first things to consider is how patients will find their way to scheduled appointments in a complex health system. Imagine that you are the person coming to an appointment for the first time. How will you find your way? What will you find there? What paperwork will you be asked to complete? What procedures are asked to do? What types of handouts and consent forms will you receive? If you are referred for tests or appointments with other health care providers, do you understand what you are to do and how to find your way to those appointments?

Creating a shame-free environment requires attention in the following areas:

- Prepare the patient for the appointment
- Exhibit an attitude of helpfulness, respect, caring, sensitivity to feelings
- Revise admission, check in, and referral procedures
- Provide patients with information
Prepare the patient for the appointment

- People with limited literacy skills find the practice of using telephone menus difficult to follow. When a patient calls for an appointment, a person should answer the phone and collect only the essential information needed to process the appointment. Patients often complain that they are asked the same questions over and over and it gives the perception that we are not coordinating our efforts with each other and that we don’t care.

- Find out if the patient needs directions to the facility and offer to mail, fax, or e-mail clearly written directions.

- Make sure signs, building markers, symbols, logos, maps are easy-to-read.

- Help patients prepare for the appointment:

  ✓ Report new or different symptoms and anything that doesn’t seem quite right.

  ✓ Bring in all their medications (prescription, herbals, vitamins, minerals, and other over the counter drugs)

  ✓ Bring copies of recent test results or reports they may have from other health care providers.

  ✓ Bring in personal health records if they have them.

  ✓ Make a list of 2-3 questions they wish to ask and place them in the order of priority.

  ✓ Bring along a family member or friend to help write down information and remember what was said.

  ✓ Make sure they understand what the doctor told them before they leave the office.

  ✓ If they have questions about the office visit after they get home, have them call the office and ask to speak with someone who can answer their questions.
Be helpful, respectful, caring, and sensitive to feelings they may have about their literacy skills

Helping patients feel comfortable during the visit is the basis for a patient-friendly, shame-free environment. Patients should be called by their title and last name; unless the patient requests that you call them by their first name. This formality is especially important with patients from certain cultures.

Non-verbal behaviors are worth a thousand words! Regardless of what is being said, if your body language shows disrespect and lack of caring, the words won’t mean anything. For example, if the receptionist is trying to check in a patient and she is on the phone, not looking at the patient, or doing other paper work at the same time, the message is that the patient’s presence is not important. For a person with limited literacy this is particularly frustrating and intimidating. Pay attention to the patient, use a warm, friendly tone, smile, and let them know that you are happy they came to the appointment.

Be sure to pick up on any verbal or non-verbal cues from the patient that might indicate their extreme anxiety or difficulty understanding what is happening in the appointment process. Look for the clues discussed in the article “You Can’t Tell By Looking” that might alert you that the patient has a problem with health literacy.

Revise check in and referral procedures

Filling out forms for registration, health history, and consent are particularly difficult for those with limited general literacy and health literacy skills. This also can be a problem for those with good literacy skills, so simple changes in procedures will be beneficial to all patients.

Tips to help make the check in process more patient-friendly:

- Offer all patients help in completing forms. Provide this help in a confidential manner, preferably in a separate area from the waiting room. People are reluctant to discuss their health problems, finances, and other personal matters in front of others.

- Forms need to be simplified, written in clear language using non-medical terms when possible, and designed in an easy-to-read format. Only ask for necessary information at registration. If health history questions are asked before or during the visit, there is no purpose in having the patient provide that information at registration. Giving unnecessary information intimidates patients who find it difficult to provide this information.
Forms may need to be translated into other languages to meet the needs of your patient population.

Referrals for tests, consults with other providers, treatments, or procedures can often be a problem for persons with limited health literacy. Often the patient is told to read the referral form and call to make an appointment. The patient in this situation often has to find out where to go, determine if insurance will pay for the service, follow any instructions given to prepare for the referral, and complete a new registration form or additional paperwork. All this can be an overwhelming task for anyone, but especially for those with limited literacy.

**Tips to make the referral process easier:**

- Written instructions should be clear, simple and in language that is easy-to-read and understand.
- Verbally go over the instructions with patients and check that they understand the information. If instructions are for procedures that require preparation, ask the patient to tell you in their own words what is required.
- Place a map on the back of referral forms and review the directions.
- Help patients with insurance issues.
- Call for an appointment for the patient before they leave your facility.

**Provide patients with information**

For most people, fear of the unknown is often worse than learning what health problem they have and what to do about it. Health care providers need to be aware of what information the patient wants and needs to know. Reducing shame and fear should be a focus when providing information to those with limited literacy.

**Tips to use when providing health information:**

- Sit down to talk to patient and family.
- Show respect with your verbal comments and non-verbal behaviors.
- Protect the patient from embarrassment in front of others by providing privacy when giving information.
✓ Be reassuring that many others have the same problem understanding the information because it’s complex. They are not expected to remember everything.

✓ Do not overwhelm the patient with too much information. Only give 3 key points at a time.

✓ Be non-judgmental and empathetic.

✓ Listen to the patient and encourage questions.

✓ Use clear, simple, direct language.

✓ Provide easy-to-read materials to reinforce the message.

✓ Check for patient understanding using the “teach back” method. Ask them to tell you in their own words what they learned.

References:

(1) Source for these and additional patient quotes
http://www.healthsystem.virginia.edu/internet/som-hlc/PatientQuotes.cfm


