

Using the Tools of Health Literacy to Activate and Engage Patients and Families: Core Functions of the Patient Education Department

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The Patient Education Department works for patients, families, and providers across VUMC and VAHN with the goal of improving health literacy and advocating for the use of clear communication with all patients. The work we do helps the institution achieve better outcomes, because it improves patient understanding and supports providers as they work to keep patients and families motivated and engaged.

Improving health literacy requires a multi-layered approach

We edit, design, and write

We edit, design, and write all types of patient-facing materials for readability and usability. This includes printed documents such as single-page home care instructions; patient letters; a variety of legal forms, including advance directives and consents; text for posters and signs; scripts for voice, video, and text messages; material for the patient portal and the hospital CCTV system; and even large books, including surgery and acute care guides for patients who've just gone through life-threatening events like a stroke or a heart attack.

The result: Tens of thousands of pages of text have been reviewed and revised for health literacy. We've edited hundreds of customized informed consent forms and helped many departments—including cardiology, home health, solid-organ transplant, neurology, and orthopaedics—create the in-depth books they need for their patients.

We collaborate, advise, and train

Working with Patient and Family Engagement, Interpreter Services, Nursing Education, the Dietetic Internship program, and others, we train and advise staff, providers, dietetic interns, and medical and nursing students on health literacy and clear communication, including teach-back, shared decision making, and joint goal setting. We also present at local and national conferences and are a resource for affiliated and community institutions.

The result: To date, we've helped train more than 1,000 nurse residents on patient engagement, health literacy, and teach-back. We recently presented on this training at the ANA Magnet Conference in Denver. This year, in collaboration with VUMC's Dietetic Internship program, our department hosted an intern for two weeks in January. The success of that work, which focused on intensive health literacy training, has now led to a new official host program. Beginning this fall, we'll host all of the program's sixteen interns for one week at a time over the course of the academic year to give them the chance to learn more about health literacy, narrative medicine, and the importance of clear communication during the clinical encounter.

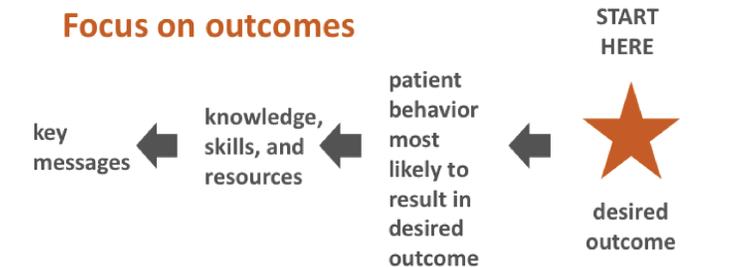
We meet patients where they are

Using the tools of health literacy means listening to patients and learning about their needs are so we can meet them where they're at.

- We routinely solicit feedback from patients, including using surveys to get feedback from them about the materials we create.
- We participate in adult, pediatric, and psychiatric patient advisory councils, which allows us to directly hear from patients.
- Our close partnership with Interpreter Services ensures that patients who read and speak in languages other than English get the plain language materials they need. When Interpreter Services receives translation requests, we step in and make sure the materials are edited for health literacy first.
- Finally, to encourage active participation by patients and families, we routinely include elements of the Patient and Family Promise in our materials.

The result: Our continual efforts to understand patients' backgrounds and to listen to their unique needs helps foster a positive dynamic in which patients become active partners in their care. This dynamic helps fulfill our promise to patients and families and upholds the VUMC policy of educating patients in ways that not only inform them, but keep them engaged and motivated as well. As a result, the Promise becomes a lived philosophy—not just a poster on the wall.

Always start with the desired outcome to create clear key messages



NCHHealthLiteracy.org

Clear communication makes a difference



80% of doctors thought patients understood



37% of patients reported actually understanding



Ethics.VA.gov



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Presenters: Cathy Atlas, Paula DeWitt, Heather Herbert, Lori Anne Parker-Danley, and Lane Stiles