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Health experts are calling for a greater focus on health literacy after new research has shown that many Australians lack the basic skills to effectively manage their health.

“Health literacy is just as important to the health of our community as many new medicines,” said Professor Mark Harris from the Centre for Primary Health Care and Equity, UNSW and the Centre for Obesity Management and Prevention Research Excellence in Primary Health Care (COMPARE-PHC).

“When people lack basic health literacy skills, like understanding health advice and following doctors’ instructions, they find it difficult to maintain their well-being and to get the health care they need when they are sick.

“This is a widespread and serious problem. Australian Bureau of Statistics research has found that a staggering 59% of Australians have difficulty with the basic skills needed for health self-management. These include locating information on a bottle of medicine about the maximum number of days the medicine could be taken and indicating levels, such as one-third, on a given container,” Professor Harris said.

Research into health literacy has found that people with low health literacy are less likely to seek preventive health care, such as immunisations, and are more likely to miss appointments, misuse medication, and fail to follow the advice provided by their doctors. This leads to more adverse events, poorer health outcomes, higher rates of hospitalisation, a lower quality of life for individuals and increased health care costs overall.

The Australian Commission on Safety and Quality in Health Care has found that low health literacy can significantly drain human and financial resources, and may be associated with extra costs of 3–5% to the health system. This problem will become more critical with the increase in chronic conditions, such as obesity, diabetes and dementia, which require complex and coordinated care.

Research undertaken by researchers at COMPARE-PHC has found that both GPs and practice nurses report that the low health literacy of patients is a barrier to managing complex health conditions such as obesity.

“We developed an intervention to train GPs and practice nurses to change the way they communicated with patients with low health literacy. Early results indicate that this intervention changed the behaviour of the health professionals and improved the health literacy of patients,” Professor Harris said.

“This is very promising because if low cost interventions can successfully support patients with low health literacy to manage their own health behaviours we can both improve people’s quality of life and achieve huge savings for the health system.



“These interventions can be as straightforward as a reminder system for appointments and some training for health professionals in how to communicate effectively with people with low health literacy. These small and low cost changes can promote better outcomes for people at risk of developing serious conditions, such as obesity, and improve the efficiency of our health system overall.

“To maximise the future well-being of our community and to get the best possible outcomes from our health system we need to act on these research findings and make health literacy a central component of all future health policies and programs,” Professor Harris said.

*Improving Australia’s health literacy skills will be the focus of a Symposium this Thursday 2 June hosted by COMPaRE-PHC at UNSW. The Symposium will include internationally recognised experts on health literacy and primary health care. Effective strategies for improving health literacy with a focus on the prevention and management of obesity in primary health care settings will be presented.*

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