

Chapter 10

Health Literacy in School

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ABSTRACT

Health literacy is a core element of patient-centered healthcare. Poor health literacy is a silent epidemic across the globe as it affects every aspect of health. Schools bear an important role in increasing health literacy. Improving health literacy in adolescence is supposed to improve the later life as adolescents are used to carry their modified behavior lifelong. Various school-based interventions covering physical and mental health have been studied and found to be effective. International bodies recommend incorporation of health-related tasks into school lessons and considered that teaching the young people will be a good investment for future. Multisectoral collaborations and locally proved effective strategies are the practical challenges. This chapter aims to focus on health literacy, global scenario of health literacy, measurement tools, role of school, interventions, limitations, and challenges of health literacy.

INTRODUCTION

In this contemporary and consumer driven world, education is considered as an important tool to increase income, reduce poverty, employ equality and justice, ensure sustainable growth and improve quality of health (United Nations General Assembly, 2015). Since 2000, preprimary education enrollment increased

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almost two third globally (UNESCO, 2015). According to UNESCO institute for statistics (2015), the youth literacy is 91% and adult rate is 85% around the globe (UNESCO, 2014). Health literacy is a domain which is directly connected to education. As a term “Health literacy” was mentioned first in 1974 in an article titled “Health Education as Social Policy” (Mancuso, 2008; Peerson & Saunders, 2009). In past 30 years, more attention has been given to health literacy and it has gained popularity in most parts of the world (Berkman, Davis, & McCormack, 2010). But, still the definition of health literacy is yet to be unified and different authors, organizations, institutions, such as American Medical Association (AMA), WHO and Institute of Medicine (IOM) (Palumbo, 2015; Serper et al., 2014; Dickson-Swift, Kenny, Farmer, Gussy, & Larkins, 2014; Sørensen et al., 2012), defined it differently. Most widely used definition mentioned, health literacy as an “individual skills to obtain, process and understand health information and services necessary to make appropriate health decisions” (Dickson-Swift, Kenny, Farmer, Gussy, & Larkins, 2014; Sørensen et al., 2012). Dan Nutbeam preferred three typologies of health literacy mentioned as functional health literacy, interactive health literacy, and critical health literacy (Nutbeam, 2008; Nutbeam, 2000; Sørensen et al., 2012). For the better understanding about health literacy and school involvement in health issues, authors reviewed updated researches and documents. This chapter thoroughly described about global status of health literacy, measurement tools of health literacy, role of school in health literacy, interventions in school setting to improve health literacy, limitations & challenges of health literacy.

BACKGROUND

Health literacy (HL) is an important determinant of both public health as well as individual healthcare and is considered a core element of patient centered healthcare (Altin, Finke, Kautz-Freimuth, & Stock, 2014) where patients play a greater role in gaining and utilizing information about their health (Manganello, 2008). Although the concept prevailed before the term health literacy was coined first in 1974 in discussions regarding health education (Peerson & Saunders, 2009; Sørensen et al., 2012), since then its importance has increased as it is concerned with the individual’s capacity to meet the complex health needs in this modern world (Sørensen et al., 2012). It covers the fields of health and education and builds an individual’s ability to enjoy good health throughout the life span (Ghanbari, Ramezankhani, Montazeri, & Mehrabi, 2016).

Healthcare sector around the world rotates an ostensibly endless process of communicating health information clearly and tries to make sure that it is comprehended clearly. To provide safe and effective practice in the healthcare sector, the system is designed in such a way that structure, processes, tools and techniques should be in place for proper delivery of health information. Health care system should include and provide facilities related to health literacy (Osborne, 2012). It has been considered as a key determinant of health (Watson, 2011; Kickbusch, 2001) and its improvement is a practical approach to implement preventive strategies among the general population (Diemer et al, 2017). Recent evidence suggests that, health literacy has gained increased importance in public health, health promotion and clinical care (Liu, Liu, Li, & Chen, 2015). It is closely linked with knowledge, motivation, competency to access, understand, appraise and apply information to form and to make decisions related to healthcare (Sørensen, 2013). For adults with limited literacy or numeracy skills and with reduced functional skills, health literacy is viewed as a contemporary effort to foster adults’ ability to manage their health (Marks, 2012).

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