International handbook of health literacy

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As the title suggests, the *International Handbook of Health Literacy* is an exhaustive text serving both as an educational read for health professionals and as a road map for anyone engaging in health literacy research. Health literacy is essentially about citizens’ ability to access, understand, and use information about health care. Beginning its journey with the origins of the term “health literacy” in the 1973 Conference on Health Education in upstate New York, the Handbook explores current research, targeted interventions, policy programmes, and predictions for the future written by an international consortium of experts.

The first section encompasses the current state of the health literacy field, reviewing terminology frequently used by researchers. It also captures a snapshot of health literacy in different communities, such as in older people, people living with chronic conditions, and in other marginalised populations. Section two of the Handbook audits a selection of community interventions aimed at increasing health literacy in various populations, providing the reader with digestible examples of both the concept of health literacy and the potential efficacy of such programmes. Children’s health literacy is given particular attention here, theorising that including children in their own health-care decisions will develop their health literacy in a safe space, with supportive clinicians and parents acting as a safety net to guide the child towards good health choices.

Section three broadens its scope to population level, discussing various nations’ approach to health literacy. Case studies of Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) nations, such as Canada, Scotland, and Finland, and their national health literacy strategies highlight the potential benefits to the populace and advisories of known pitfalls to be avoided. A chapter centred on the health literacy of New Zealand’s Māori population outlines several contexts in which Māori health outcomes are worsened by poor health literacy. Particularly eye-opening was a discussion of the Ministry of Health’s “A Framework for Health Literacy”, a 2015 publication that identifies steps the Ministry can take towards building a health-literate public and a health system that communicates better to those lower levels of health literacy. This may provide some impetus for further research into the challenges New Zealand faces in promoting health literacy to its increasingly diverse population. Section four looks to the future, exploring how research in this area can be improved by promoting more participatory research and by acknowledging the interconnectedness of health literacy and other factors that reduce health care participation.

The handbook also discusses the concept of mental health literacy at length. This section is of acute importance to today’s students, who are more aware of mental health-care and issues than the generations before them. A chapter by Anthony F. Jorm, a Melbourne University Professor renowned for his work in population-level mental health action, argues that much of the general population is developing knowledge about mental health disorders and effective self-help strategies for milder issues. However, Jorm argues that population mental health literacy can be improved and that any shortcoming could have significant effects in a crisis. Lack of mental health literacy may contribute to often large delays between onset of a mental illness and recognition of an issue. Furthermore, a deficiency of mental health first aid skills may lead to ineffective peer interventions in crucial moments.

The Handbook serves as a reminder to us as burgeoning medical practitioners that people who walk through a clinic door are not “empty vessels”, ready and thirsty to be filled with knowledge provided by us as experts. Rather, patients come with their own pre-existing notions and ideas of their condition, potential investigations or treatments – an understanding that may be difficult to alter in a 15 minute consultation. Building health literacy from a young age that encompasses all areas of hauora is essential for developing a robust population – the Handbook provides some direction for medical practitioners and community organisations to aid the wider population in developing better health literacy. The Handbook also practices what it preaches by providing, alongside its print copies for purchase, a free and fully searchable eBook for download from OAPEN (open access academic books at oapen.org) as a further contribution to reducing inequity in health. Although its hefty nature may scare students, *International Handbook of Health Literacy* is an informative read for any student interested in advocating for better health understanding, and therefore better health outcomes, for New Zealanders.

References


About the author

Sylvia is a Trainee Intern at Dunedin School of Medicine, interested in how we as developing clinicians can prepare ourselves for our future careers. When not scouring the web for obscure e-books to read and review, she enjoys exploring the Dunedin sunshine when it shows itself.

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Health Literacy in Sickness and Health. Health literacy skills are needed in sickness and in health. The Ottawa Charter for Health Promotion (WHO, 1986) states that health is created in the context of everyday life, where people live, love, work, and play. It follows that health literacy becomes relevant in various situations of life as well as in peoples' capacities as community members, consumers, or patients. Most studies of health literacy in populations have focused on classifying the proportion of individuals who may have inadequate functional health literacy. To date, the cut-offs or benchmarks have not been directly linked to clinical or social impacts. Paul L. Kimmel MD, in Handbook of Dialysis Therapy (Fifth Edition), 2017. Health Literacy and Nonadherence. A health-literate organisation makes health literacy a priority. It makes health literacy part of all aspects of its service planning, design, delivery and performance evaluation to reduce the health literacy demands on consumers. A health-literate organisation: makes health literacy everyone’s business leaders, managers, and clinical and non-clinical. Drawing on international best practice, the following Six Dimensions of a health-literate organisation have been developed in New Zealand. They form the framework for a health literacy review. Developing a health literacy statement helps to build a shared understanding of health literacy across your organisation and to create a health-literate organisation. This could be a step towards undertaking a health literacy review. Health literacy addresses a range of social dimensions of health including knowledge, navigation, communication as well as individual and organizational skills for accessing, understanding, evaluating and using of information. Especially over the past decade, health literacy has become a major public health concern globally as an asset for promoting health, wellbeing and sustainable development. This comprehensive handbook provides an invaluable overview of current international thinking about health literacy, highlighting cutting edge research, policy and practice in the field. With a diverse