

Health literacy knowledge and experiences of associate degree nursing students: A pedagogical study¹

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Abstract

Health literacy is recognized as a major health problem in the United States. Preparing nurses to address the challenges of low health literacy in clinical settings is crucial because of their role in patient education. This study was a cross-sectional one designed to assess the health literacy knowledge and experiences of 391 associate-degree nursing students. Results indicate that participants had knowledge about health literacy; however, they could benefit from additional educational opportunities that would reinforce that knowledge and skills in health literacy.

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1. Introduction

Health literacy is quickly becoming recognized as a major health care problem in the United States. The concept of health literacy includes not only the ability of individuals to read and understand health care information but also the ability to function within the health care system. Today's health care environment is an increasingly complex one, and it is vital that patients have the skills to navigate this system, including making informed decisions and caring for their chronic health conditions at home. Nurses play a key role in providing health care information to individuals in a variety of settings; therefore, it is crucial that nurses are prepared to face the challenges of working with patients who may have limited literacy skills. Patient

teaching and engagement are core nursing responsibilities (Sofaer & Schumann, 2013). However, if patients do not understand what nurses have taught them, effective communication has not taken place (Parker & Gazmararian, 2003). Mandates from several government agencies and patient education standards established by the Joint Commission on Accreditation of Healthcare Organizations (JCAHO) all support teaching nurses about health literacy (JCAHO, 2005). However, there is little evidence to support that nursing programs are preparing their students with the knowledge and experiences required to assist individuals with limited health literacy. This pedagogical assessment of the health literacy knowledge and experiences of community college nursing students may serve as a starting point in providing nursing educators with baseline data to determine how well students are being prepared to meet the needs of individuals with low health literacy skills. Obtaining a baseline of the knowledge of current students would provide key information that could inform future instructional strategies designed to deepen students' knowledge and skills in health literacy.

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To date, no research has been done in a nursing program at the associate degree level to determine the current level of health literacy among its student population. Research has been conducted at academic medical centers involving both medical students and baccalaureate nursing students. The Borough of Manhattan Community College (BMCC) has the largest associate-degree nursing program in the City University of New York system, and it would be important to determine the health literacy knowledge of this nursing student population. Ensuring that the curriculum provides nursing students with the skills and confidence to meet the health care needs of their patients is an academic priority. The purpose of this study was to determine the current knowledge of health literacy for nursing students enrolled in a community college associate degree program. The aims of the study included the identification of what current nursing students know about health literacy and how it may affect patients and their ability to function within the health care setting.

1.1. Literature review

The Institute of Medicine defines health literacy as the “ability to obtain, understand, and act on healthcare information and instructions” (Institute of Medicine, 2004). This includes activities such as taking prescribed medications appropriately, providing informed consent for medical procedures and tests, following instructions for self-care of a health condition, reading food labels in order to follow a prescribed diet, and navigating the complex health care system (Cutilli, 2005; Lorenzen, Melby, & Earles, 2008). A more current definition, proposed by Sorenson et al. is that “health literacy is linked to both literacy and includes an individual’s knowledge, motivation and competence to access, understand and appraise and apply health information in order to make judgments and take decisions in everyday life concerning healthcare, disease prevention and health promotion to maintain or improve quality of life during the life course” (Sorensen et al., 2012). Low health literacy has also been associated with inappropriate use of emergency services, higher rates of hospitalization, and increased health care costs (Gazmarian et al., 1999; Williams et al., 1995; Center for Medicare and Medicaid Services, 2009; Koskan, Friedman, & Messias, 2010). In the literature, inadequate or limited health literacy has been reported to have adverse effects on health outcomes (Agency for Healthcare Research and Quality, 2011). Individuals with limited health literacy have overall poorer physical function, less knowledge about managing their chronic health conditions, and participate less in the health care decision-making process (Baker et al., 2002; DeWalt, Boone, & Pignone, 2007; Dewalt et al., 2006).

Limited health literacy can make it even more difficult for patients to interact with their health care providers. These activities can be overwhelming and become even more so if patients have limited health literacy skills. It would be especially important that health information be written at

appropriate levels and to educate nurses and other health professionals to use effective communication and teaching strategies. They must also ensure that health information is clear and easy to access as well as provided in a manner that patients, especially those with low health literacy, can use and understand. Low health literacy in the United States is costly, both in terms of poorer health and the financial burden on the health care system. It is estimated that yearly health care costs resulting from low health literacy levels range from 50 to 73 billion dollars (Vernon, Trujillo, Rosenbaum, & DeBuono, 2007). It is also estimated that the annual health care costs for those with low health literacy is much higher than those with adequate health literacy. Interventions to address low health literacy skills have improved patient outcomes. Several studies looking at self-management of heart failure treatment, diabetes care, and asthma self-care have found that addressing health literacy increased favorable patient outcomes (Dewalt et al., 2006; Olson, Sabogal, & Perez, 2008; Sobel et al., 2009). Studies have demonstrated that future research should identify effective strategies for delivering information to patients, especially in those with inadequate health literacy (Kountz, 2009).

Although it is important that health information be written at appropriate levels, it is also equally important to educate nurses on how to identify patients with limited health literacy and to use effective communication and teaching strategies. Many health care professionals, including nurses, are unaware of which of their patients have health literacy limitations and often may have not been adequately trained in interacting with patients with lower health literacy levels (DeSilets & Dickerson, 2009; Vernon et al., 2007). It is crucial that health providers recognize when patients have low literacy levels and how that can affect their understanding of health issues such as self-care behaviors or an understanding of their health conditions. Although health care providers often think that they are able to identify patients with limited health literacy levels, studies indicate that they fail to identify up to half of the patients who struggle to understand health information (Rogers, Wallace, & Weiss, 2006; Singleton, 2009). One study looked at the health literacy knowledge of senior baccalaureate nursing students enrolled at state universities in Louisiana and found that participants were able to identify low socioeconomic groups at high risk for low health literacy and were also aware of the consequences associated with low health literacy (Cormier & Kotrlik, 2009). However, the same group was less likely to screen for health literacy correctly. Another study with a sample of 245 health care providers and students conducted at an academic medical center found that health care provider knowledge and awareness of limited health literacy continues to be a challenge. Most of the respondents were unable to identify how low health literacy could impact the health care system (Jukkala, Deupree, & Graham, 2009).

Nursing students’ awareness of the impact that limited health literacy has on the health care system and the

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