

## Health Literacy: **Keep it CLEAR**

By Donna M. Roberts, MD, Professor & Director of Medical Student Education  
University of Louisville, Department of Family & Geriatric Medicine

“What did the doctor tell you about your heart, Mom?” “Oh he said everything was fine. He just gave me a new medicine and said he wanted to schedule some tests but I’m not sure why....”

Is this the way it goes for you sometimes? A lot was said while you were in the office but you didn’t understand some of it. This is a common scenario, and we want to offer you some tips for the next time you come to our



office. We want our patients to understand what was said to them about their health so they can make better decisions and be healthy.

This idea is called health literacy, defined as “the degree to which individuals have the capacity to obtain, process, and understand basic information and services needed to make appropriate decisions regarding their health.” That sounds like a lot so let’s break it down into simple terms. Doctors and nurses use different words to talk about your health and as a patient you may not understand the words OR you may understand the words but have a hard time making decisions when asked to give agreement to a treatment. This is very common: in fact at least one-third of people struggle in some way with limited health literacy. Most of these will not tell our staff, and many have not told their family members that they have this problem. We know that we cannot tell by looking whether a patient understands what is being said.

Patients' limited health literacy affects their health in many ways. They may not participate in what we define as "preventive care," trying to keep something from happening or preventing a disease. This means things such as keeping up with immunizations (shots) or getting screening tests such as mammograms. Patients who do not understand how or when to take their medicines or why the medicines were prescribed may not take them or take them incorrectly. This can lead to more complications from medical problems such as diabetes or high blood pressure, and it can lead to more visits to hospitals and emergency rooms.

Drs. Donna Roberts and Jeri Reid have an ongoing project to train medical students and family medicine residents and faculty to be on the lookout for "red flags" of limited health literacy such as:

- Incomplete forms
- Medications not taken properly
- Delay in making health related decisions

There are tests that can find out if patients have problems understanding, but they decided the problem is common enough to use simple techniques with ALL patients to be sure they understand better. This is outlined as the **CLEAR** method.

- **C-Create a Shame-free Environment**
  - This means the staff and everyone involved should be willing to help you understand what is being said.
  - Signs should be easy to read
  - You should not be ashamed to ask for help in completing forms or ask us to explain something to you better.
- **L-Listen Actively and Closely**
  - This means we should make eye contact with you and not rush you through the interview.
  - If an interpreter or family member is needed we will arrange this.

- We will try to avoid interruptions and limit the amount of information we give you at one time.
- **E- Encourage Teach-back**
  - We may use something called “teach-back” to have you repeat what we have said.
  - This is not a test for you but a way for us to see if you understand what we are saying.
  - We should be willing to explain it again if necessary.
- **A-Avoid Medical Jargon**
  - We should not use medical terms that you may not understand.
  - As much as possible we should use words that are familiar to patients when we describe medical problems.
  - We should speak slowly enough for you to understand and use short sentences.
- **R-Reinforce with Visual and Written Materials**
  - We may draw pictures or use copies from a book that will help you understand your body.
  - We may provide you with simple handouts to describe the disease or the treatment.
  - Sometimes we may suggest a site on the internet that will help you.

That is a lot of information to give you, but remember it is our goal to be sure you understand what we are saying. It will help you stay healthier and may keep you from going to the hospital or emergency room.