

Wisconsin Health Literacy

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Wisconsin Health Literacy is an organization that focuses on improving health literacy throughout the state. It is a division of Wisconsin Literacy and it is headquartered in Madison, Wis. Its mission is “to promote clear communication between those who give and those who receive health care services.” This year, it is celebrating 10 years as an organization. In 2010, Wisconsin Literacy staff and their partners across the state of Wisconsin gathered at a conference to discuss the future of health literacy efforts within the state and how to improve health outcomes through educational programming. Their goals were for all health care providers

to be trained in health literacy concepts, for medication labels to follow universal design principles, and for health literacy efforts to have a sustainable infrastructure. From this gathering, Wisconsin Health Literacy was created, and there have been many successful projects since. One of the organization’s earlier projects was Let’s Talk About the Flu, which provided community education about the dangers of the flu and the safety and benefits of vaccines. This was the first project in the Let’s Talk About series, and many others have followed this educational format aimed at improving health literacy for specific topics.

The term “health literacy” has many definitions. At Wisconsin Health Literacy, staff members believe that health literacy is two-sided. The patient side is typically

described as having the ability to find, use, understand, and process information to make better healthcare decisions. The other side is that of the professionals. It is important for providers to be able to effectively communicate this health information to facilitate their patients’ understanding. Health literacy goes beyond reading and writing. It extends to every aspect of healthcare, including listening, speaking, working with numbers, and then analyzing that information to improve patient health outcomes. Health literacy is fluid throughout life. It can change with age, education, and stressful situations, making everyone susceptible to having low health literacy at some point in their lives. This emphasizes the need for educational programming to encourage all patients to

Below: Kari LaScala presenting a Let’s Talk About Medicines workshop.



be their own advocates.

Day to Day Practice

Wisconsin Health Literacy (WHL) works with people from every type of background. This includes health professionals and individuals within the community, including immigrants, refugees, and seniors. WHL staff have worked extensively with doctors, physician assistants, nurses, CNAs, social workers, pharmacists, insurance providers, caregivers, and others. Due to this diverse population, it was important to partner with various organizations to help facilitate connections. WHL has partnered with many organizations across the state, starting with the 70 coalition member literacy agencies of Wisconsin Literacy, Inc. Additional partners include organizations that serve seniors, as well as those connected with community centers, libraries, and housing units, to name a few. The goal is to be able to reach a large audience, and partnering with these organizations across the state helps with that goal. Since WHL is headquartered in Madison, Wis., these partnerships are essential in order to reach every region of the state, stretching as far as Ashland, Wis. They also thank many of their great volunteers across Wisconsin for making presentations possible. When volunteers are not local to a particular area that needs services, they will drive to wherever they are needed.

Additionally, WHL is partnered with the Pharmacy Society of Wisconsin (PSW) and the University of Wisconsin-Madison School of Pharmacy. Both organizations have been instrumental in providing guidance and insight for various projects relating to pharmacy, such as the Medication Label Project. Another advantage of the partnership is that it leads to increased participation among pharmacies. The connection with PSW makes it much easier to connect with pharmacies to discuss potential collaborations with WHL on various projects.

Raising the Bar

Over the past 10 years, there have been numerous projects initiated by WHL in an effort to increase health literacy across



Above: Some members from the Patient Advisory Group who helped guide the Medication Label Project from the patient perspective.

Wisconsin. Kari LaScala, associate director of WHL, recalls one of her favorite recent projects as the Medication Label Project, which aims to make sweeping changes to pharmacy labeling. Through a partnership with the University of Wisconsin-Madison School of Pharmacy, WHL is working to change how information is presented on medication labels. The goal of this project is to make it easier for patients to read, and ultimately understand, the information about their prescriptions. Instead, the directions for use are better written as, “Take 1 pill in the morning and 1 pill in the evening.” Changing the presentation of this information should help decrease confusion and improve patient outcomes. This project has the potential to impact a large number of prescriptions. So far, over 4 million prescription labels per year have been improved thanks to this project. As more pharmacies adopt this label change, more prescriptions will be improved.

Another recent favorite of LaScala’s was the Let’s Talk About Opioids program. Through this program, WHL partnered with prisons across the state to educate inmates on the risk of using opioids when they leave prison. They wanted to provide education about the risks of overdosing, and to discuss tolerance levels. Unfortunately, the team was only able to do a couple of in-person sessions before COVID-19 hit. Because of this, a lot of changes happened to the programming.

Instead of having individuals from WHL come in and present in the prisons, they did a train-the-trainer webinar so staff in the prisons could give the presentations. They also reworked the materials that went with the presentation to allow for continued use. The workbooks were changed to be more self-guided and allow learners to read, answer questions, and learn more about opioids.

Measuring improvement is an important aspect of providing educational presentations. To do this, community-based projects utilize pre- and post- assessments. These can help assess what learners have gained from the presentation. If there appears to be a deficiency in the way information is taught, then WHL staff are very willing to make changes to improve future presentations. They can emphasize different areas, or try to clarify information. Additionally, they often do a 60- or 90-day follow-up survey. This survey not only tests for knowledge, but also for behavior change. Results can indicate whether the workshop had long-lasting impacts on how people act or use the techniques that were taught.

Bumps in the Road

All projects have occasional issues that need to be addressed. Projects initiated by WHL are not exempt from this. For pharmacy projects, time is a large factor. Community pharmacies are busy, and

adding additional projects can seem daunting. Many pharmacists might agree that a certain project is important and should be implemented, but they might not have the time or resources to participate. This is where student pharmacists become crucial. As avid learners, they are always looking for ways to move the profession forward. Because of this, they play an instrumental role in helping WHL complete these projects.

Another common challenge deals with initiating new projects. This makes having the necessary connections even more important for success. Wisconsin Health Literacy heavily relies on their partners to accomplish their goals. There is a mutual trust that must be built. This trust leads to continued partnerships and can even lead to growth through referrals. When it is important to reach many patients throughout the state, having trusted partners is essential.

Like many organizations, WHL has had to make changes due to the COVID-19 pandemic. In order to provide their workshops, they have had to transition to online video conferencing. This has been challenging, especially when it comes to creating rapport with learners. Participants are typically quieter and more nervous during these online workshops, compared to being in-person. Wisconsin Health

Literacy hopes to transition back to their in-person workshops in the near future. For now, they will continue to provide their services in any way that they are able.

Moving Forward

Celebrating 10 years is quite the accomplishment. As a state, Wisconsin is always looking forward to what is next, and WHL follows this same motto, with several plans for growth. They have recently started to look at how health literacy impacts health equity and how the two relate. "Health equity" essentially means that all patients have the same fair and just opportunity to be healthy. Wisconsin Health Literacy wants to focus on how disparities in health equity can be remedied. Additionally, WHL plans to continue with its community-based projects. Staff believe that continuing to provide workshops and other educational materials is possibly more important now than ever before. WHL plans to create materials about COVID misinformation; communicating with patients with dementia; and finding health information online, just to name a few. They will also continue with the Medication Label Project, with the goal of expanding this to many more patients. There is always more work to be done. Health literacy will always need to be addressed, and the essential

work of WHL will need to continue to help improve patients' lives.

If you would like to get involved with WHL and learn more about them, please visit their website at wisconsinliteracy.org/health-literacy, or reach out to them via email at healthliteracy@wisconsinliteracy.org. They are frequently looking for volunteers to help with their workshops, especially outside the Madison area; training is provided prior to presenting. For pharmacies interested in joining the Medication Label Project, please contact Kari LaScala at kari@wisconsinliteracy.org. The project is likely to end in the spring of 2021.

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