

UNDERSTANDING THE IMPORTANCE OF HEALTH LITERACY AT A COMMUNITY LEVEL: KEY FINDINGS FROM A CHNA



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BACKGROUND



Health literacy is defined as “the degree to which individuals have the capacity to obtain, process, and understand basic health information and services needed to make appropriate health decisions.”¹

Within the sphere of community health, health literacy emerges as an essential aspect of patient-centered health care. It influences the communication dynamics between patients and providers, potentially impacting long-term health outcomes and overall quality of life.

Inadequate health literacy is linked to challenges in understanding health-related information, limited knowledge of diseases and lower medication adherence, which contribute to poor health, high risk of mortality, insufficient and ineffective use of health care, increased costs, and health disparities.²

¹ Institute of Medicine (US) Committee on Health Literacy; Nielsen-Bohman L, Panzer AM, Kindig DA, editors. Health Literacy: A Prescription to End Confusion. Washington (DC): National Academies Press (US); 2004. 1, Introduction. Available from: <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/books/NBK216033/>

² Liu, C., Wang, D., Liu, C., Jiang, J., Wang, X., Chen, H., Ju, X., & Zhang, X. (2020). What is the meaning of health literacy? A systematic review and qualitative synthesis. Family medicine and community health, 8(2), e000351. <https://doi.org/10.1136/fmch-2020-000351>

PROJECT



Texas Health Institute (THI) collaborated with the City of Laredo Health Department to produce the 2022-2023 Community Health Needs Assessment, which investigates five distinct ZIP codes within the city and identifies priority health and social determinants of health needs. THI used a mixed-methods approach, incorporating quantitative data sources such as publicly available data and a robust bilingual survey, alongside qualitative data collection, which involved key informant interviews and focus group discussions. The data is anchored in the local context and uplifts the lived experiences of community residents.



Levels of Basic Health Literacy in Webb County Census tracts in red have basic or below basic levels of health literacy, based on the National Assessment of Adult Literacy health literacy results. Areas in green have above basic levels of health literacy.

Source: The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, Health Literacy Data Map, 2015

FINDINGS



Key findings from the CHNA conducted in the City of Laredo identified different components of personal health literacy.

- A large portion of the population in Webb County has basic or below basic levels of health literacy.
- Among the priority health and social determinants of health needs identified, health literacy and insurance literacy were major barriers for many residents of Laredo, especially for those who are undocumented.
- Focus group participants indicated that as Laredo is predominantly Hispanic or Latino, many people still feel there is a disconnect in understanding how to access, seek, and receive care. They mentioned challenges like implicit health-related biases rooted in Hispanic and Latino cultures, lengthy translation times for English documents during appointments, and confusion caused by complex medical terminology in pamphlets, brochures, and official forms.
- Key informants emphasized the importance of improving cultural competency within the health care system and providing education to residents on health services and insurance, particularly in the context of health literacy.

IMPLICATIONS

For individuals to receive health care that is integrated and comprehensive, they must possess a fundamental level of health literacy, while health care providers should give importance to cultivating a degree of cultural humility when interacting with patients. This approach aims to bridge the gap in patient-provider relationships and enhance overall understanding.

LESSONS LEARNED

When discussing health literacy, it's imperative to consider the unique cultural differences of each individual patient, as both health knowledge and the cultural aspect play an equally significant role in shaping patient-centered health care.

“The impact of health literacy on their families and their lives is huge, because people are dying. They are dying just because they don't have the information that can help them get to the resources. I think it's so important that people become aware of how to take care of themselves and these types of illnesses.”

– KEY INFORMANT