

## Health literacy in other countries

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I conducted a search of the recent published literature as well as the World Wide Web to identify evaluated interventions related to health literacy from countries other than the United States. Unfortunately, I found very few peer-reviewed evaluations with the exception of projects in Chile, Bolivia, Bangladesh and Nepal.

The project in Chile involved the application of a plan for improving rural health, one aspect of which focused on literacy activities. The evaluation consisted of interviews with a representative sample of participating families about their satisfaction with the services that they received. Among other things, the evaluation suggested that literacy activities in the rural health initiatives contributed to improvements in the quality of life of the population (Gandolfo, et al., 1988).

The project in Bolivia which was also carried out in a rural area involved the delivery of multi-sectoral development programs, one of which was a literacy program. The evaluation consisted of a crosssectional study with a comparison community. It was found that children of individuals participating in health, credit and literacy programs were significantly less likely than children from comparison communities to be malnourished or at risk of becoming malnourished, after controlling for social class, source of drinking water, and availability of health facilities (Gonzales, et al., 1999).

The project in Bangladesh was a Sanitation and Family Education initiative which went beyond traditional health education to use a dynamic communication process, with active community participation and needs assessments consistent with "interactive" or "critical literacy" (Nutbeam, 2000). The traditional approach was compared with the enhanced approach using both quantitative and qualitative methods and researchers concluded that the enhanced approach had a strong impact on diarrhoea (Jahan, 2000).

The project in Nepal, called the Health Education and Adult Literacy (HEAL) project, was intended to increase the literacy skills and health and family planning knowledge of locally recruited, illiterate female Community Health Volunteers and young mothers with whom they work. The evaluation of the pilot phase consisted of formative and summative components and included a comparison with women in another literacy program. Compared to the latter, the participants in the HEAL project demonstrated significant positive differences in both health knowledge and literacy acquisition skills, suggesting that literacy skills can be acquired in adult non-formal education programs and can contribute to health improvements and to other improvements related to health (Comings and Smith, 1994).

From the search of web-sites, a number of other initiatives were identified. However, only one mentioned that an evaluation was underway. This was a project in Guinea, West Africa which trained literate refugee women to assist less literate peers to learn the

reproductive health content and words associated with "picture stories."<sup>1</sup> Thus, there does not appear to be a great deal of scientific evidence regarding the effectiveness of health literacy initiatives outside of the United States. Moreover, there is some question regarding the generalizeability of the evidence that exists to the United States. Nevertheless, the evidence that does exist suggests that the concept of health literacy" or at least the acknowledgement of the idea of a relationship between literacy and health does exist outside of the United States, and there appear to be programs which address this issue with some degree of effectiveness.

Other sources confirm this conclusion.

For example, the search of websites identified what appear to be promising programs and policy initiatives in Sweden, the United Kingdom and Australia. The UK initiative includes a project to bring a "learning advisor" to patients and staff of three General Practice surgeries, one to raise awareness and knowledge of health practitioners to equip them to better deal with the issue of poor literacy skills among patients, and a project using theatre techniques to address communication and literacy difficulties affecting the access to health information and health care by people with learning disabilities.<sup>2</sup> The Swedish initiative involved the establishment of a group to encourage the implementation of plain language initiatives in Swedish state agencies, including the Ministry of Health, and the Australian initiative involved the establishment of "health literacy" as a National health goal – as has been done in the United States.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> [http://www.worlded.org/projects\\_topic\\_8.html](http://www.worlded.org/projects_topic_8.html)

<sup>2</sup> <http://niace.org.uk/research/health/Prescription.htm>

<sup>3</sup> <http://www.health.gov.au/pq/bho/1999/v5n3/nhpa.htm>

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