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Health literacy as a strategy to improve communication with patients

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Health literacy(HL), clear communication, collaborative practice, a culture of safety, culture of enquiry, promoting evidence-based practices, and patient centered care are among many recommendations made by the Institute of Medicine (IOM), regulatory agencies and experts (2010). HL, a fairly new concept, is an integral part of clear effective communication and has been recognized as having a significant impact on the “health and wellbeing,” patient outcomes and healthcare costs. The cost of healthcare expenditures due to low HL is an additional \$73 billion annually. Consider that only 12 percent of adults in the United States (US) have the necessary skills to navigate the complexities of the nation’s health care system (Agency for Healthcare Research and Quality [AHRQ], 2016). Oftentimes, patients misunderstand health instructions and are perceived as non-compliant. Adding to the complexities of caring for these populations are the social determinants of health (culture, families, communities, socio-economic status, habits, and lifestyle choices). HL is defined as “the capacity to obtain, process and understand basic health information and

services, to make appropriate health care decisions or act on health information and the ability to access or navigate the healthcare system” (AHRQ, 2015, p.2). HL applies to everyone, every health care organization and a much bigger problem than is recognized. HL is more than just about patients not understanding medical vocabulary, it is about the patient’s ability to understand health instructions, diagnosis, medications, to actively participate in their treatment, care, and informed decision-making during and after hospitalization whether sick or healthy. It is imperative that nurses, healthcare providers know how to assess each patient’s HL level prior to, and incorporate principles of HL in communication and patient teaching. If patients do not understand the healthcare instructions they will be returning to the hospital quickly after discharge. Clear, effective communication decreases medical errors, length of stays, readmission, and improves quality, safety, and outcomes.

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