Why We Need a Health Literacy Association

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Why We Need a Health Literacy Association

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We believe health literacy needs an inclusive professional association to flourish as an independent field of research and practice. The creation of an international, multidisciplinary, peer organization has the potential to enhance the careers of health literacy researchers and practitioners as well as nurture the field’s future by providing a global resource for educational and professional development.

A health literacy professional association can link research and practice, promote professional development, and raise public awareness through the development of member services and outreach initiatives. In our opinion, the need for a health literacy association is demonstrated by noting what it portends compared to the status quo.

For example, a health literacy professional organization could provide a clearinghouse of international research and best practices. Similarly, such an organization would be in an excellent position to promote cross-disciplinary scholarship and collaboration among biomedical, public health, and related disciplines. This could be accomplished through member services such as:

- Publishing a comprehensive website, refereed journal, and newsletter covering health literacy activities worldwide;
- Hosting regional, national, and international meetings by supplementing or embracing the existing efforts of health literacy organizations; and
- Linking health literacy researchers, practitioners, and faculty in the United States and other nations.

A health literacy professional organization can promote professional leadership (and create a higher profile for health literacy among medical, public health and other professions) through such initiatives as:

- Supporting health literacy continuing education and professional development opportunities and resources;
- Establishing guidelines for health literacy degree programs as well as other educational initiatives in higher education and professional schools; and
- Enabling members (and the field) to self-determine issues related to professional priorities, standards, and leadership.

A professional organization also can foster a broader understanding of health literacy’s foundational role in enriching health and clinical care through such member efforts as:

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1 The authors are participants in the activities of the IOM Roundtable on Health Literacy.
• Raising public and policy makers’ awareness about opportunities to enhance health literacy;
• Engaging patients, caregivers, and adult learners in health literacy activities; and
• Advocating the implementation of health literacy principles and practices within the health care delivery system.

While many of the world’s estimated 2,500 health literacy specialists are members of other medical and professional associations, we believe only a separate professional organization can ensure the self-determination of norms, values, and perspectives by health literacy professionals. In addition, an international, peer-run organization is essential to establish any biomedical and public health discipline as a recognized and flourishing field of research and practice.

Finally, a forward-thinking professional organization can help citizens, stakeholders, and skeptics appreciate how health literacy is central to the future of clinical medicine and public health.

While practitioners and researchers have acknowledged the need for a health literacy association, we believe it is time to act.\textsuperscript{1,2,3,4,5}

References:
2. Erikson, M., Smith, P. 2013. \textit{Introduction to a health literacy professional association}. Presentation at the Wisconsin Health Literacy Pre-Summit Meeting, Wisconsin Health Literacy Summit, Madison, WI.