

## Editorial

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### Health literacy and health promotion in context

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The past 25 years has seen remarkable growth in interest in health literacy among researchers, policy-makers and practitioners. This interest has been underpinned by academic debate about the concept, definition and measurement of health literacy, and further strengthened by a growing volume of research examining the relationship between health literacy and health outcomes. This includes a small but increasing number of studies that report on interventions to improve health literacy in different community and clinical populations.

The reasons for this rapid expansion in interest are not difficult to understand. For researchers, health literacy offers an observable phenomenon that can be used to understand and explain variation in health and disease outcomes. For health promotion practitioners, health literacy is conceptually attractive in its fit with contemporary health promotion, understood as a personal and communal 'asset' that can be developed through educational, organisational and other interventions that support greater control over a range of determinants of health. For those working to reduce health disparities, health literacy has been shown to be a significant, independent and modifiable social determinant of health. For those interested in evaluating the quality and appropriateness of health information, education and communication interventions, health literacy has long been proposed as a useful outcome measure.

Health literacy has also emerged as an important issue in clinical practice and public policy. Work over the past two decades has established health literacy as an identifiable and manageable risk in clinical care, of particular importance in the management of long-term and complex conditions that depend upon successful patient engagement

and management. For policy-makers, health literacy has been adopted to support a full spectrum of policy positions reflecting a desire for greater patient and public engagement in health decision-making. This is reflected in a series of national and regional health literacy policies and strategies issued by governments in countries with diverse economic, political and health systems (1).

All of these advances are reflected in this special edition of *Global Health Promotion*, which provides a mix of original research in different populations (including adolescents, school students, refugees, elderly, and indigenous Māori), and using innovative media (virtual/digital worlds, comic books); the development of a novel methodology for assessing government policies on health literacy; and examination of the growth of professional communities of practice. In making a call for expressions of interest in this special edition, we were delighted to receive almost 30 responses. When selecting the articles for final inclusion in the special edition, we gave preference to studies that either were describing interventions, or else advanced knowledge that will ultimately influence the effectiveness of interventions, whether sited in health promotion, education or clinical settings. The selected papers reflect the diversity of research, policy and practice that characterises the field at this stage in its evolution.

Strengthening personal and community skills in ways that enable and empower people to be confident, informed and engaged in decisions that influence the determinants of health has been a cornerstone of modern health promotion since the publication of WHO's Ottawa Charter for Health Promotion in 1986 (2). This goal of strengthening personal skills has evolved continuously and been included consistently in

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WHO statements on health promotion for the past 30 years. The concept of health literacy has emerged as naturally complementary to this original commitment, first referred to in the 2005 WHO Bangkok Charter (3), and forming a core strategy of the most recent 2016 Shanghai Declaration on promoting health in the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development (4). This Declaration recognises 'health literacy as a critical determinant of health'; that health literacy 'empowers individual citizens and enables their engagement in collective health promotion action'; and states that 'health literacy is founded on inclusive and equitable access to quality education and life-long learning. It must be an integral part of the skills and competencies developed over a lifetime.' The Declaration commits WHO to 'develop, implement and monitor intersectoral national and local strategies for strengthening health literacy in all populations and in all educational settings'.

The International Union for Health Promotion and Education (IUHPE) has been instrumental in driving forward health promotion to realise the vision in these Statements and Charters. Reflecting this leadership role, this special edition includes the *IUHPE Position Statement on Health Literacy - a practical vision for a health literate world* developed by the IUHPE Global Working Group on Health Literacy<sup>1</sup>. The document provides a solid base for discussion and advocacy for health literacy both within the health promotion community, and also among stakeholders and partners in health promotion. The position statement was developed through a highly participative approach over the course of 4 years, during which it took on a variety of shapes and forms. This included extensive in-person and on-line consultations across the global membership of IUHPE, in order to capture diverse perspectives, and to collect feedback from IUHPE members and other health promotion colleagues and stakeholders. The version published in this special edition, recently ratified by the IUHPE Executive Board, summarises current knowledge and emerging ideas about health literacy, and provides advice on priority actions in research, practice, policy and workforce development for adoption and implementation by IUHPE members and a wide community of collaborating partners.

All of these contributions highlight the advances being made in the definition and measurement of health literacy and our understanding of health

literacy as a determinant of health in communities and society. These papers and the position statement provide practical guidance on interventions to improve health literacy in community and clinical populations. The contributions also point to future research questions, and highlight some of the challenges associated with the rapid adoption of new ideas, and their translation into policy and practice.

In presenting this special edition *Global Health Promotion*, in keeping with the IUHPE Health Literacy Global Working Group 2015–2018 Workplan, we not only intend to advance the science supporting health literacy, but also to ensure that discussion is balanced and in perspective. Although the concept of health literacy has tended to focus attention on individuals' skills and capabilities, far more is now understood about the interaction between the person and their environment – the context within which individuals 'obtain, understand and act' on health information. Correspondingly more attention is now given to the concept of 'health literate organisations' and environments, in ways that are completely compatible with the health-promoting settings concept and approach. In the wider context of health promotion, there is an important distinction between improving health literacy to achieve externally defined goals, often determined by health professionals (such as adherence to medication instructions), and interventions designed to promote the interactive and critical health literacy that is a foundation of modern health promotion.

Set in this context, and at this stage in the evolution of health literacy, it is important that organisations like IUHPE provide both clarity and context to our understanding. The *IUHPE Position Statement on Health Literacy - a practical vision for a health literate world* provides clarity based on the best available information, but also recognises that research and development of our understanding has to continue. Our experience in compiling this special edition has highlighted the relative paucity of intervention studies, for example. The IUHPE has an important role in advocating for more frequent and systematic testing of different health education and communication interventions with a wide range of populations and contexts, to improve our understanding of what works, under what conditions, and why. This special edition of *Global*

*Health Promotion* deepens our understanding and identifies some next steps.

As health literacy attracts the interest and commitment of policy-makers, it is equally important for the IUHPE to continue to act as a credible, independent source of information on effective action, to provide substance to current political interest, and to ensure that health literacy continues to be considered within the wider context of health promotion, as one of a number of complementary approaches to improving health in populations including social mobilisation and political advocacy. It is by combining these different approaches to health promotion that we can have the greatest impact on the social and economic determinants of health.

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#### *Note*

1. GWG-HL: <https://www.iuhpe.org/index.php/en/global-working-groups-gwgs/gwg-on-health-literacy>.

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