

6. Significance for ABE Population in General

Even for people with higher literacy, being a health care consumer in the United States today is daunting. As Rudd (2002) describes, public health patients are expected to be aware of their health needs, take action, gain access to a complicated care system, engage in technical discussions, know their rights and responsibilities, advocate for themselves and family members, and make policy decisions. As the health care system increases in complexity, more responsibility is being put on the patient to learn about changing health care technology, procedures, and methods of payment, while looking more to the Internet for basic health information to support their healthcare-related decision-making. The challenges to adults with low literacy in meeting these expectations are enormous.

Low health literacy has been correlated with less and later use of health care services and more negative health outcomes. We can be sure that many of our students are in the large percentage of adults with low health literacy in this country. What happens to these learners when they are faced with health problems? Teachers often find that learners with health problems lose focus, increase their frustration level, increase absenteeism, and sometimes leave school (Povenmire & Hohn, 2001; Singleton, 2002). On a practical program level, teaching about health and health care can help learners have greater educational success by providing them with knowledge to better manage health issues, which in turn might allow them to attend school more regularly and focus more on their learning when they are in class.

Adult literacy learners come from a wide variety of ethnic backgrounds, another fact which doesn't bode well for their health. In the United States significant health disparities along racial and ethnic lines exist. (See the Facts and Figures section on pages 21-24 for examples). One of the objectives of the President's Healthy People 2010 initiative is to eliminate these disparities. Adult education is being recognized as a significant part of the solution (Office of Disease Prevention and Health Promotion, 2002).

References

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