

American Association of Family and Consumer Sciences

Resolution Supporting Basic Health Literacy

WHEREAS, health literacy is the degree to which individuals have the ability to obtain, process, and understand basic health information and services needed to make appropriate health decisions; and

WHEREAS, health literacy is critical to obtaining and maintaining health; and

WHEREAS, low health literacy is predictive of poor health status and outcomes; and

WHEREAS, low health literacy is associated with health disparities experienced especially among people with limited education from culturally diverse communities; and

WHEREAS, poor health outcomes cost individuals, families, and society; and

WHEREAS, increasing health literacy can save lives, save money, and improve the health and well being of millions of Americans; and

WHEREAS, health and health policies are on the public's agenda as evidenced by local school wellness policies, the emerging Plain Language Act, the Children's Health Insurance Program Reauthorization Act of 2009, and the proposed National Health Literacy Act; and

WHEREAS, supporting professionals whose work assists individuals, families, and communities in making informed decisions about their well being, relationships, and resources to achieve optimal quality of life is the mission of AAFCS; therefore be it

RESOLVED that AAFCS supports initiatives, programs, and public policies which incorporate principles and practices of health literacy; provide funding for expanding the body of knowledge; and/or support school and community-based educational programs that increase the health literacy of individuals, families, and communities.

Submitted by: AAFCS Nutrition, Food Science and Hospitality Community; AAFCS Texas Affiliate

Background Information

Health literacy is complex and is impacted by culture and society, health systems and the education systems all of which impact on health outcomes. Health literacy as a concept is a recent entry into the literacy field. Consequently, definitions and the conceptual framework are in flux. Health literacy emerged from the medical field in response to changes in the population and resulting communications challenges. The Institute of Medicine (2004) defined health literacy as: “the degree to which individuals have the capacity to obtain, process, and understand basic health information and services needed to make appropriate health decisions.”

The World Health Organization uses this description: “Health literacy represents the cognitive and social skills which determine the motivation and ability of individuals to gain access to, understand, and use the information in ways which promote and maintain good health.” Ratzan & Parke offer: “The degree to which individuals have the capacity to obtain, process and understand basic health information and services needed to make appropriate health decisions.” And from the federal policy arena comes the *Healthy People 2010* definition: “The degree to which individuals have the capacity to obtain, process and understand basic health information and services needed to make appropriate health decisions.”

The first assessment of health literacy found that only 10% of American adults are health literacy proficient (Kutner, et al, 2006). Adults most at increased risk for low health literacy include the elderly, minority groups and those with less than a high school education (IOM, 2004). Low health literacy predicts a person’s health better than age, income, employment status, education level, and race (Ad Hoc Committee on Health Literacy for the Council on Scientific Affairs, 1999).

A recent study estimated that the annual cost of low health literacy ranges between \$106 billion and \$238 billion dollars (Vernon et al, 2007). Individuals with low health literacy have increased use of emergency services, are less likely to be able to control chronic diseases such as diabetes, and have lower use of preventive procedures such as early childhood immunizations and mammograms.

Interest in health literacy has moved into the public policy arena. The proposed National Health Literacy Act of 2007 may be addressed in the new, 111th Congress and by the new administration. Information on the act, introduced with no further action-to-date, is available at:

<http://www.govtrack.us/congress/bill.xpd?bill=s110-2424>

Selected References

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