Health Literacy and the Elderly
Lynn Mark, D.O.
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Abstract

A 2004 Institute of Medicine report, *Health Literacy: A Prescription to End Confusion*, reported ninety million people lack the “capacity to obtain, process, and understand basic health information and services needed to make appropriate health decisions,” even though a majority are native-born English-speaking adults. These patients may not be able to read appointment information, understand how to take their medications, or be able to complete medical forms. Patients’ lack of ability to effectively communicate with health care providers decreases health care access, increases cost, and compromises quality of care.

Of the 38 million U.S. seniors aged 65 and older in 2007, approximately eleven million of them currently lack the skills they need to manage their health, and that number will grow as the baby boomer population reaches seventy-one million by 2030. Studies have shown that individuals with lower levels of health literacy are more likely to be hospitalized and have worse disease outcomes. Patients’ lack of understanding – especially about effective management of chronic disease - drives up costs. Treatment of chronic disease cost $510 billion in 2000, and is projected to cost more than $1 trillion in 2020.

Patients are being encouraged to take on more responsibility for their health, but approximately one out of three senior citizens does not have the health literacy skills to do so. Health literacy needs to be addressed by physicians and other healthcare providers in health literacy pilot programs, as well as by legislation at the federal level.