



Patients need information. Is that clear?

→ Kathy Redmond ■ EDITOR

The urgent quest for novel cancer treatments engages much of our attention, but could we be overlooking other opportunities for increasing patients' survival and quality of life?

One such opportunity that is increasingly gaining the attention of policy makers is improving health through improving health literacy. Defined as "the skills which determine the motivation and ability of individuals to gain access to, understand, and use information in ways which promote and maintain good health," good health literacy can play a crucial role in improving outcomes, whether it be in prevention, treatment, palliative care or survivorship.

Poor health literacy is associated with poorer general health status, increased risk of hospitalisation and a lower capacity to care for oneself and share in treatment decision making. The problem is greater among lower socio-economic groups, ethnic minorities and the elderly, and consequently these groups have much to gain by health literacy initiatives tailored to their needs.

A recent European survey has shown that one in ten patients finds the information provided by physicians difficult to understand and many more struggle to decipher the information provided on a medicine leaflet. However, the problem is under-recognised and poorly addressed by health professionals, many of whom overestimate patients' ability to understand and use health information.

As more and more cancers evolve into chronic conditions, we need to focus on

how to meet the needs of cancer patients with literacy problems. As a first step we should audit patient information materials in current use to find out how far they were written with the needs of less literate patients in mind. Do they comply with the principles of clear health communication? Would they pass the clarity test if subjected to a readability assessment? Similar assessments done for other groups of patients suggest much of it would not.

There is help at hand. A number of groups have developed useful guides on how to write materials for patients with low literacy levels. Literacy experts recommend plain language, shorter sentences and larger type sizes, with a sharp contrast between the text and background. Testing draft materials on the target audience is also important. These are common-sense recommendations which should become the gold standard for the development of all patient education resources.

Health professionals can help promote health literacy by using jargon-free plain language in all their interactions with patients. They can also assess patients' literacy levels using one of the readily available and easy to administer health literacy assessment tools. This could help in tailoring information to the patient's level of understanding, in line with the current personalised approach to medicine.

These are steps we can all take right now to improve cancer outcomes, which are currently compromised by a disconnect between what professionals think patients need and what patients actually need.