

# THE BLC BULLETIN

February 2017

## Literacy, Healthcare, & You

### From the Director's Desk

Celine O'Neill, Executive Director



I don't know about you, but going to the doctor always makes me anxious. I want to be clear and articulate about my problems or symptoms, and I want to ensure that I am equally clear about what he or she is recommending. I come in with my problem "list," and I try to leave with an even longer list of particulars – what to do or take, when, in what amounts, and for how long. I look up terminology on the computer before I make my visit, just so I am somewhat knowledgeable about the concepts and vocabulary and then I follow-up the visit with more research to learn everything I can about the condition and how my doctor's instructions compare to other writings on the same subject.

I often wonder how our students prepare to visit their doctors, and how they fare in trying to understand the jargon and instructions without the benefit of internet research and copious notes. Most of the time they are relying on memory or medical office instructions which may be incomprehensible to them. I know that I couldn't keep it all straight without my list of questions, my notes, and my follow-up, and there are times when I question whether I have been thorough or thoughtful enough.

And then I think about the other possible complications that illiterate or functionally illiterate adults face: not understanding the interactions among their various medicines, not being able to read the dosages, not knowing when to take their sick children to a doctor, and not realizing the potential dangers of medicine interactions with food or drink, etc. It is a scary proposition to be sure.

Our February newsletter focuses on medical illiteracy as an especially important aspect of adult illiteracy. Please take some time to explore these issues, and consider what advantages literacy provides in your life and your ability to access healthcare.

### What IS Health Literacy?

The [Agency for Healthcare Research and Quality](#) defines health literacy as "the capacity to obtain, process, and understand basic health information and services; to make appropriate health care decisions; and to access/navigate [the] healthcare system."

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### Upcoming Event

**Thursday, March 9th**

3:00—6:30 p.m.

[New Volunteer Orientation](#)

at BLC Salem Plaza

### Recent Events

**CSSMV Riverview opened  
1/3/17!**

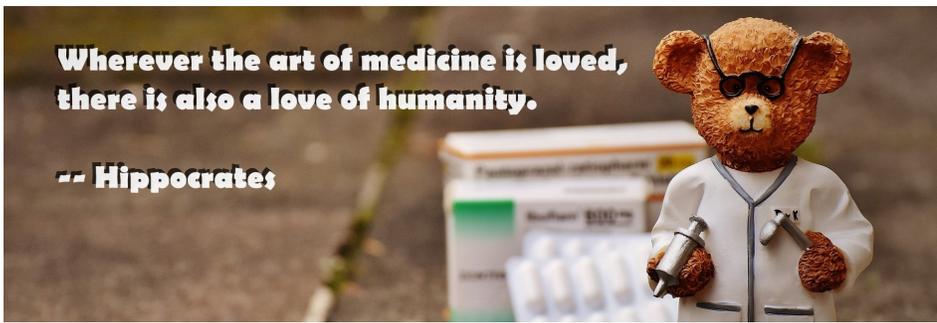
This new location at 922 W. Riverview Ave serves Adult Basic Education students thanks to our continued partnership with Catholic Social Services.

**Day Reporting Center opened  
1/9/17!**

At the DRC, located at 1901 S. Gettysburg Ave, the BLC provides tutoring services to residents of the Bennett J. Cooper Reentry Center and to members of the nearby community.

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## Food for Thought



## Issue Focus: Literacy & Healthcare

Bridget Shingleton, Marketing and Communications Manager



Nearly all American medical schools administer the Hippocratic Oath to their freshly minted medical school graduates every year. Written in the 4th century BC, the Hippocratic Oath puts forth a set of moral ideals to which physicians should strive, many of which are now considered outdated though the tradition lives on.

Medical care has changed a great deal since that oath was written. For example, the oath instructs doctors to never "use the knife," which would preclude any and all surgeries from taking place now. Of course, medical knowledge and technology have advanced so much that surgeries that were formerly deadly are now routine, and we know that surgical procedures are often patients' best courses of action.

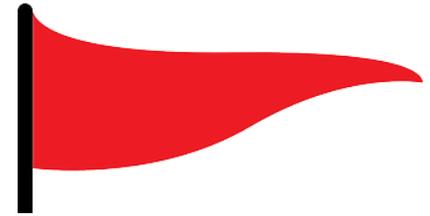
Another way in which medicine has changed is in the spread of information. With the communication technologies available to us today - radio, tv, telephones, and the internet - the spread of information is faster and the availability of information broader than before. As a result, more people today know more "best practices" for good health than ever before in human history. While humanity as a whole is better off for having this knowledge, what happens when people have limited access to or understanding of medical knowledge?

People with lower literacy skills are at a huge disadvantage when it comes to healthcare. Doctors' expectations of their patients have increased in many areas, including preventative care, self-assessment of health, and self-treatment. All of these rely on the patient to know what is good to do and when and how to do it.

For low-literate patients, these expectations can be an impossible burden to bear. When people are less aware of health risks and healthy habits, preventative care is not even on their radar. Conditions that can be prevented will eventually need medical attention, and it's easy to see the difficulties that arise for low-literate patients then. Not understanding doctors' instructions, not taking medicine in accurate dosages, and not realizing deadly combinations of medications with each other, poor diet, and alcohol consumption can lead to the exacerbation of health problems, even resulting in death.

Couple this knowledge with the fact that people with low literacy skills are more likely to be unemployed and/or in lower socioeconomic brackets, and we see that they are less likely to have the ability to seek a doctor in the first place. The scary truth of the matter is that low literacy skills damage people's health before, during, and after seeking medical care.

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## Warning Signs

People with low health literacy skills commonly face these difficulties:

1. Frequently missed appointments
2. Incomplete registration forms
3. Non-compliance with medication
4. Inability to name medications, explain purposes or dosages
5. Identifying pills by looking at them, not reading labels
6. Inability to give a coherent, sequential medical history
7. Asking fewer questions
8. Lack of follow-through on tests or referrals

[Source](#)

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## Learn More



The [NCCC](#) works to increase health equity for people of diverse backgrounds so everyone has access to care.



The [HRSA](#) is an agency of the US Department of Health and Human Services that works to expand healthcare access and enhance care quality.

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## Issue Focus, Continued

### So what can we do?

Healthcare professionals can educate themselves and each other about the warning signs of low literacy in their patients. A list can be found in the sidebar of this newsletter. One recommendation made to healthcare providers is to deliver information to their patients in a way that assumes low health literacy. By erring on the side of caution, as the Agency for Health Research and Quality points out, "everyone benefits from clear communications."

Tutors and volunteers can check in with their students. Ask them questions about their own, their families', and their friends' health habits. Choose lessons and materials that teach healthy behaviors and ways to prevent and recognize health risks. Simplify your messages into handouts that your student can take home and use as references for the future. Use the teach-back method to have your student demonstrate or explain a health skill to you after you have covered it.

It is important to emphasize a long-term perspective rather than thinking only about immediate situations; providing your student with take-home reference material written at their level encourages them to prioritize their health even if the two of you stop working together in the future. When in doubt, talk to the Program Manager about your concerns for your student, and seek advice for your student's individual needs, including vision and hearing problems. You are often your student's best advocate!

## Learn More, Continued



[Healthy People 2020](#) studies and provides goals for national health trends while aiming and healthy habits for all. [See how education fits into their plans here.](#)

## Facts & Figures

36%



36% of adults, more than 1 in 3, were identified to have serious limitations in health literacy skills.

National Assessment of Adult Literacy, 2003.

46%



46% of all patients studied did not understand their medicine label instructions.

Institute of Medicine, "Health Literacy: A Prescription to End Confusion."

4x



Adults with low literacy skills are up to 4 times more likely to have negative health behaviors.

"Literacy and Child Health: A Systematic Review," Sanders et al., 2009

\$230B



Low health literacy adds around \$230 billion to healthcare costs in the United States each year.

ProLiteracy, "Media Toolkit 2015"

*Salem Plaza  
4825 Salem Ave*



*CSSMV Brown  
1046 Brown St*

*Day Reporting Center  
1901 S. Gettysburg Ave*

*CSSMV Riverview  
922 W. Riverview Ave*

[www.brunnerliteracy.org](http://www.brunnerliteracy.org)