

# An introduction to improving health literacy in your organisation

## A fact sheet for quality managers

This fact sheet provides an introduction to health literacy, and how your organisation's environment affects how people understand and use your information and services. Taking steps to make your organisation's environment more accessible will also help you meet some of the requirements of the National Safety and Quality Health Service (NSQHS) Standards.

### Key points

- Health literacy is an important part of safe and high-quality health care
- Improving your organisation's health literacy environment involves supporting consumers to understand and use your information and services effectively
- Improving health literacy may help improve experience, outcomes and reduce the risk of adverse events for consumers.

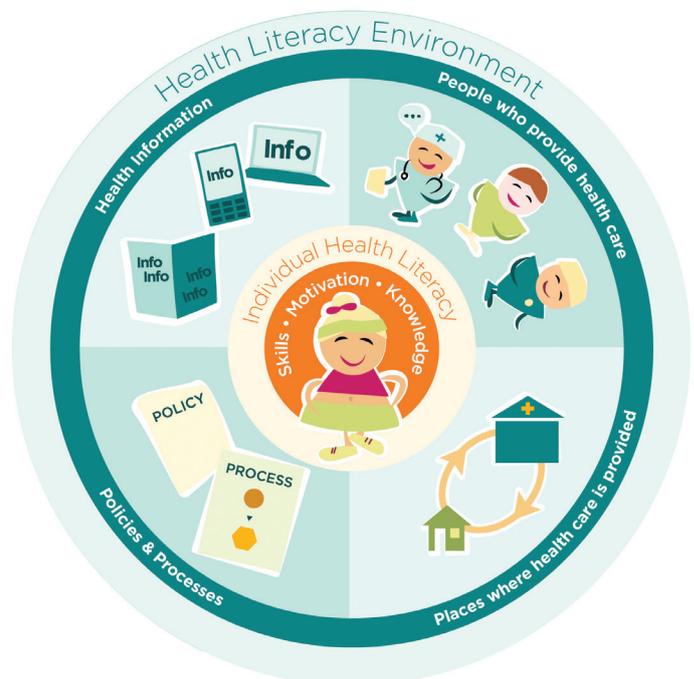
### What is health literacy?

Health literacy is about the way consumers find, understand, use, and act on information about health and health care. This can be verbal, written or online information, information embedded into the environment (such as signage and wayfinding), or information embedded in systems and processes of health care.

Health literacy can be separated into two parts:

**Individual health literacy** is the characteristics of a person that shape how they access, understand, appraise and apply information to make effective decisions about health and health care, and take appropriate action. Individual health literacy is shaped by a person's skills, knowledge, motivation, experience and capacity. It is not static and can fluctuate when people are stressed, anxious or unwell.

The **health literacy environment** is all of the parts in your organisation that affect the way that consumers access, understand, appraise and apply health-related information and services. It includes the way your



services are set up, your policies and processes that underpin service delivery, the materials you provide to consumers, your staff and how they interact with consumers. Some of the more obvious things in the organisation's environment that affect how consumers understand and use your services include signage and way-finding, health information brochures, letters and guidance on care, referral or discharge processes, informed consent processes and the type of consumer liaison you provide.

## Why is health literacy important?

In Australia, more than half of adults have a low level of individual health literacy, and the healthcare system is also very complex. This makes it hard for consumers to understand some of the information they are provided about health care, to know which healthcare provider to see, to understand their options, and to be able to weigh up the risks and benefits of different options. Having a complex environment and being provided with complex information makes it hard for consumers to actively participate in care.

## Improving the health literacy environment

As someone working in a health service organisation, you may not have a lot of influence over a person's individual health literacy. You do however, have the capacity to look at your organisation's health literacy environment and make improvements.

You can find ways to reduce the complexity in your environment and make it easier for consumers to understand your information, to navigate your service, and to work in partnership with your staff.

Improving your health literacy environment is like any other quality improvement project: you need to assess the situation, plan what you are going to do, act on that plan, and review whether the changes you have made have had the impact you intended.

There are a range of tools and examples to help you plan how to improve your health literacy environment. Further fact sheets in this series provide guidance on how to embed health literacy into your organisation's policies and processes, create a positive way-finding experience, develop information that is easy to understand, and support staff to meet the health literacy needs of consumers.

## Links with the National Safety and Quality Health Service Standards

Currently, the National Safety and Quality Health Service (NSQHS) Standards include a number of actions related to health literacy and supporting partnerships with consumers. These actions focus on ensuring that consumers are involved in reviewing information that is prepared within the organisation and that they are engaged in the governance of the organisation.

The NSQHS Standards (second edition) will be released in late 2017 and health services will need to be assessed against this edition when they are accredited from January 2019. The NSQHS Standards (2nd ed.) have a more overt focus on health literacy. There are new actions in the Clinical Governance Standard that focus on the physical environment, including signage and way-finding. There are also actions within the Partnering with Consumers and Comprehensive Care Standards which focus on developing and providing easy-to-understand information, sharing decision making, engaging in partnerships for care planning, and the delivery of comprehensive goal-directed care.

## Further information

Further information and resources about health literacy, including other fact sheets in this series, are available on the Australian Commission on Safety and Quality in Health Care website.

**Website:** [www.safetyandquality.gov.au/our-work/patient-and-consumer-centred-care/health-literacy/](http://www.safetyandquality.gov.au/our-work/patient-and-consumer-centred-care/health-literacy/)