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Search Smart for Your Health - A Statewide Health Literacy Campaign

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Abstract

The Georgia Health Sciences Library Association (GHSLA) and the Georgia Alliance for Health Literacy (GAHL) partnered to educate residents about reliable health information online to raise health literacy awareness across the state of Georgia. The two groups received a gubernatorial declaration designating October as Health Literacy Month in Georgia. Information was posted online and demonstration workshops were held. The networking opportunities that resulted have allowed for additional partnerships and grant support to address the vital health literacy information needs of those with health disparities through clinician training and additional workshops.

Keywords

Adolescents; elderly; consumer health; health disparities; health information seeking; health literacy; online health information; young adults

INTRODUCTION/BACKGROUND

To raise awareness of health literacy and quality health resources across the state of Georgia, the Georgia Health Sciences Library Association (GHSLA) and the Georgia Alliance for Health Literacy (GAHL) partnered to educate residents about reliable online health information. As part of their missions, both associations seek to encourage health care educators to utilize reliable online health information for patients with low health literacy. Health literacy is defined by the Institute of Medicine's report, *Health Literacy: A Prescription to End Confusion*, 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” (Nielsen-Bohlman, Panzer, and Kiedig 2004). However, it is well known that these skills are just the tip of the iceberg when it comes to health literacy.

The National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) conducts a National Assessment of Adult Literacy by measuring three types of literacy: prose, document, and quantitative. Prose literacy focuses on reading and comprehension skills. Document literacy assesses tasks such as completing a form or reading a schedule. Finally, quantitative literacy deals with numeracy skills such as calculating a tip (NCES 2013). According to the 2003 NCES survey, 17% of Georgians lack basic prose literacy skills. This aligns closely with the estimation that 1 in 6 adults do not have sufficient health literacy (Kutner et al. 2006). At the time of the NCES survey, the population of persons 16 years of age or older in the state was 6,365,942, meaning that more than 1 million Georgia residents would have limited literacy. In the metro Atlanta area, which includes ten counties, there are approximately 4.4 million residents (Atlanta Regional Commission 2017); of these residents, nearly 748,000 are likely to have limited literacy skills. Adding to this challenge for health care providers is the economic and cultural diversity of this region. In the city of Atlanta, approximately 10% of households speak a language other than English. (U.S. Census Bureau 2016). Clear communication between patients and providers is essential to providing quality health care; therefore, raising awareness of health literacy is beneficial to the region and state.

According to the Pew Institute, 35% of U.S. adults say that at one time or another they have gone online specifically to try to figure out what medical condition they or someone else might have (Fox and Duggan 2013). Without the proper skill set and resources, individuals grasp at straws trying to find quality health information to make informed decisions. People with limited literacy skills are more likely to have chronic conditions and are less able to manage them effectively, resulting in higher health care costs and less use of preventative services (Office of Disease Prevention and Health Promotion 2010). It has been noted that 24% of patients with low literacy skills do not know how to take medication four times per day (Certified Literate Community Program 2017).

Physicians, pharmacists, and other health care providers should recognize the need to communicate clearly with all patients no matter what their health literacy level is. Clear communication ensures that a patient understands how to take their medications and how to manage chronic conditions. Awareness of patient needs can have an impact on how they interact with the health care system. The economic burden of poor health literacy is estimated to be between \$106 billion and \$240 billion annually in the United States (Vernon et al. 2007). Therefore, through this GHSLA and GAHL partnership, the hope is to raise awareness of health resources for patients so they can have a better conversation with health care providers.

COLLABORATION

GHSLA members were invited to give a presentation on library-related health information resources at a GAHL meeting in 2015. The core of the presentation showed how the interests of health sciences librarians matched the goals of GAHL. These goals included: 1) improve understanding of the health care system so that citizens can access preventive

services and stay well, 2) provide patient education to help manage chronic conditions, 3) help prevent adverse medical events by improving patient-provider communication, and 4) reduce excess hospitalizations and readmissions with better self-care.

Medical librarians can contribute to each of these goals through Area Health Education Centers (AHECs) and hospital libraries. AHECs are available to assist patients with information to help them make informed decisions about their health care. Hospital libraries can provide information to patients and have the added benefit of options to coordinate database access for physicians so that the physicians can provide education materials to patients. Drawing these parallels to GAHL's goals and GHSLA's resources helped to connect the groups at the beginning of the meeting. The discussion proceeded to share the role medical librarians can have in helping both professionals and consumers find quality information. Resources from the National Library of Medicine were shared with GAHL members. Short overviews of MedlinePlus <<https://medlineplus.gov/>>, NIH Senior Health (now under the National Institute on Aging <<https://www.nia.nih.gov/health>>), the Household Products database <<https://householdproducts.nlm.nih.gov/>>, and Pillbox <<https://pillbox.nlm.nih.gov/pillimage/search.php>> were given. The librarians discussed instances where they have participated in community health outreach to educate community members with quality health information sources. The presentation was well received and the librarians connected with a group they normally would not have interactions with on a regular basis.

This presentation evolved into a partnership whereby a website and "smart searching tools" were created and showcased during National Health Literacy month. The organizations received a gubernatorial declaration that October 2015 was Health Literacy Month in Georgia (GAHL 2015). Information was posted on both organizations' websites to promote the newly developed "smart searching" tips and links to reliable health information websites. Demonstration workshops were held in two locations with different age groups to address online health information-seeking needs. Press releases were distributed to statewide news organizations along with flyers to state health educators. Outreach efforts by GHSLA and GAHL reached approximately 40 individuals. Presentations to both groups were derived from the "smart searching" tips.

Workshop One (Seniors)

The first workshop was held at The Atrium at College Town, a 190-unit senior living facility in downtown Atlanta, Georgia. The workshop was organized and facilitated by members of GHSLA. Participants were invited to attend an open session to learn about health literacy and National Library of Medicine resources. Presenters used a combination of PowerPoint slides and open group discussions to demonstrate NIH Senior Health resources, MedlinePlus, and health literacy skills. The slide presentation covered information on how to evaluate a website for accuracy and currency as well as tips for clear communication with one's health care provider. The NIH and NLM websites were used as examples of where quality health information should be found. Throughout the presentation, seniors used their personal devices which included laptops, smartphones, and iPads to follow along with hands-on activities.

During the question and answer portion of the presentation, discussions about medication management were raised by the seniors. Even though medications were not the focus of the health literacy outreach the presenters felt it important to address the questions. The presenters noted the usefulness of keeping an accurate detailed list of all medications they are taking, including prescriptions and vitamins. According to a recent article published in *JAMA*, many patients have difficulty taking the right medications at the right time, properly self-managing diseases, or following physician discharge recommendations (Koh and Rudd 2015). Therefore, it is imperative that older adults possess the necessary skills to be advocates for their health and well-being.

Workshop Two (Teens)

The second workshop was conducted at the Center for Pan Asian Community Services during the after-school program for teens. The private nonprofit center, located in Atlanta, Georgia, promotes comprehensive health and social services for immigrants, refugees, and the underprivileged. While their primary services are for people from Asian and Pacific Island countries, they provide services to the entire local community including African Americans, Hispanic Americans, White Americans, and Asian Americans. This location was a great opportunity to promote health literacy to the area's diverse population and support the center's mission for self-sufficiency among immigrants and refugees. The after-school program "aims to build a healthy, caring and responsible community by increasing youth academic achievement, increasing youths' internal assets (i.e., commitment to learning, caring for others, self-esteem) and reducing youths' risky behavior" (CPACS 2017).

The workshop was arranged by GAHL and facilitated by members of GHSLA. There were 24 teens who participated in an instructional workshop with hands-on activities to learn about health literacy and specifically teen health resources through MedlinePlus Teen's Page <<https://medlineplus.gov/teenspage.html>>. Participants were verbally surveyed as to which health resources they've used to find information. Many teens used WebMD to obtain information for school or for a family member. A quick discussion transpired about how to identify and evaluate health resources online based on currency, reliability, accuracy, and point of view.

After the lecture portion of the session, facilitators asked the teens to divide into groups for active learning demonstrations with the task of evaluating a predetermined website on the above-mentioned criteria. Each small group then shared their findings with the entire group. All of the participants did an admirable job in determining whether or not their assigned website was appropriate to use for reliable health information. The teens asked various age-appropriate questions in the discussion portion of the session, leading to an open conversation about their parents and grandparents.

The instructors encouraged sharing what was learned in the activities with their families. One teen shared that he goes online often to look up health information for his grandparents. Considering that 60% of adults obtain health information from family or friends (Fox and Duggan 2013), instructors shared the website, Senior Health <<https://nihseniorhealth.gov/>>, with the participants. The teens were supplied with handouts and other helpful resources from NLM to support smart searching online.

EXTENDING THE PROGRAM

Following the two outreach programs, members of GHSLA have continued to be involved with GAHL by attending their open meetings, and some have even joined as members of this group, further solidifying the partnership. The gubernatorial declaration of October as Health Literacy Month in Georgia was renewed in 2016 and had the support of both organizations again. In the Winter of 2016, GHSLA received a Health Literacy Pilot Project Award from the National Network of Libraries of Medicine Southeastern/Atlantic Region to continue this type of outreach with community groups in a more formalized method. The pilot project is focused on developing curriculum to teach current and future health care professionals how to address patient needs throughout the state with health literacy in mind. A core group of health sciences librarians will receive in-depth health literacy training through conferences and the GAHL. The goal is to improve a clinician's ability to identify and communicate effectively with patients at the appropriate level of health literacy. This project will be the first phase to train health sciences librarians on health literacy tools, how to implement these tools, and how to teach others, including but not limited to medical school students, practicing clinicians, and other interested librarians. During this phase, the health needs of Georgians will be reviewed, and using that insight, curriculum will be created by a core group of members from both organizations primarily using resources available through NN/LM to address the most common health disparities in the state. In the second phase, the curriculum will be tested in senior centers, youth after-school programs, and in multiple hospital settings with clinical educators, medical students, and patients. Once the curriculum is finalized, training will be offered to GHSLA and GAHL members to take to their institutions and hospitals for student/staff training. Phase three will continue with train-the-trainer classes and additional community outreach projects in the Atlanta metro region and rural northern and southern regions in Georgia. This phase will include additional surveys and interviews on the effectiveness of the curriculum for both clinicians and community members.

LESSONS LEARNED

As noted earlier, collaboration between the organizations has strengthened the outreach efforts of both groups. GAHL has interns who are able to assist with scheduling and coordinate press releases, and GHSLA has librarians who are interested in giving presentations on resources available from NN/LM and other resources. In the future, outreach opportunities should be publicized more among members of both organizations as some in GHSLA were unaware of the events. The development of presentation slides and handouts, however, has facilitated the option for other GHSLA and GAHL members to give presentations on their own and not have to create a program from scratch. Another aspect of this project that can benefit from attention moving forward is website development and coordination. When two groups are partnering to present information, it is difficult to decide how to present that online. There can be pages on both websites or a separate site created that is linked to both organization websites. Moving forward, the access to presentation materials will be planned with better detail to highlight contributions and benefits to members.

CONCLUSION

Librarians are known for outreach efforts to their patrons (Parker and Kreps 2005), but outreach efforts to other professionals individually or to organizations are not always discussed. Networking with a dedicated health literacy group has provided opportunities that resulted in mutual benefits. Through this collaboration, the professionals involved in GAHL were exposed to the resources that the GHSLA member's accessed frequently, and they learned that the GHSLA members were also advocates and educators of health literacy efforts in the community. Moving outside of the library walls can help educate health care professionals on the skills that librarians bring to patient education. This partnership seeks to have a greater impact in addressing the vital health information needs of the citizens of Georgia. Plans for future projects are in the beginning stages, and the goal is to educate as many individuals as possible, especially those in health disparate areas across the state.

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