

# Functional Health Literacy: Health Information in Everyday Life

*Rima Rudd, Sc.D., M.S.P.H., Sc.D.,*

*Senior Lecturer on Society, Human Development, and Health,*

*Harvard School of Public Health*

Dr. Rima Rudd, Senior Lecturer on Society, Human Development, and Health at the Harvard School of Public Health, provided a brief history of the growing interest in health literacy over the past several decades and gave an overview of the literature on the topic to date.

There are now more than 1,000 peer reviewed articles on health literacy. Early studies in education and adult literacy set the stage for future research with evidence that literacy influences one's ability to access information, use print materials, and participate in society. According to Dr. Rudd, leadership in the early days of the health literacy movement came from medicine, with a strong focus on patient-provider communication.

## **A New Focus: Functional Health Literacy**

Patient-provider encounters are less frequent than other health-related situations that occur at home, at work, and in the community. Individuals must make daily choices about what they eat, how they exercise, whether to put on sunscreen, or how to take over-the-counter medications. For this reason, Dr. Rudd's research has focused on functional health literacy—the ability to read, understand, and act on health information in everyday life. She and her colleagues established a project to clearly define functional health literacy and to derive a set of provisional estimates of the distribution of health literacy in the United States. Their report, *Literacy and Health in America*, is an analysis of health literacy skills based on health-related materials and tasks from national and international surveys of adult literacy conducted before 2003 ([Rudd, Kirsch, & Yamamoto, 2004](#)).

“We need to look at both the demand side (the health care system) and the skill side (individual capacities) in order to make improvements in health literacy.”

*Rima Rudd, M.S.P.H., Sc.D.*

Dr. Rudd and colleagues found that as many as one-half of adults lack the skills needed to accomplish health-related tasks such as following directions on medicine labels, reading nutrition labels, describing symptoms, or using a map to locate health facilities. They also found that general literacy skills and health-related literacy skills are related; those with more general literacy skills will also be more likely to have stronger health literacy skills ([Rudd, et al., 2004](#)).

## **Improving Health Literacy: A Two-Sided Approach**

Dr. Rudd emphasized a two-sided approach to improvement in health literacy. Researchers and others concerned with health literacy must examine both:

- The demand side—what the health care system requires
- The skill side—individual capacities to respond to system demands.

Toward this end, Dr. Rudd has begun to deconstruct health activities by delineating the specific tasks associated with each health activity and assessing the skills needed to complete the tasks. For example, in order to enhance and maintain their health, individuals are expected to read nutrition labels and purchase healthy food, prepare a dish from a recipe, understand charts and graphs such as the Body Mass Index, and/or plan an exercise routine. For many people, there is a mismatch between the demands of the activity and their skill level.

In response, Dr. Rudd and her colleagues have developed an in-depth training protocol for adult educators to help them increase health literacy skills among their students. The resulting three Health Literacy Study Circle guidebooks have been peer-reviewed and piloted ([Rudd, Soricone, & Santos, 2006a](#), [2006b](#), [2007](#)). They have been implemented in the State of Louisiana, New York State, New York City, and Boston.

### **Advice to Researchers and Practitioners**

Dr. Rudd concluded by emphasizing the need for researchers to develop testable hypotheses related to the link between literacy skills and health, thereby clarifying the pathways from health literacy to health outcomes. Findings can then inform practice, which, in turn, must include rigorous evaluation studies. As a result, the health sector can eliminate literacy-related barriers to health promotion and access to care.

At the same time, health researchers and practitioners must work closely with colleagues in education to clearly define the needed skills associated with access to healthcare services, management of chronic disease, and participation in disease prevention activities and early screening. Adult education professionals must then work to develop these skills among members of the general public to improve health literacy.