

The Effects of COVID-19 on Health Literacy

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Abstract

Health literacy is a valuable tool in the prevention of poor health choices leading to adverse health outcome among vulnerable populations. The COVID-19 crisis is a global public health emergency accounting for over 44 million confirmed cases and more than 1,000,000 deaths globally and has disrupted and transformed the delivery of healthcare. Though most information on COVID-19 is presented in a simple and easily understood manner, unfortunately, complex and sometimes false information pervade the “COVID-19 infodemic” which requires from individuals a degree of health literacy to be able to utilize the information correctly.

Addressing health literacy and health communication, especially among our vulnerable population can significantly address health inequity that pervades the healthcare system and mitigate the effects of low/poor health literacy. In this fight against COVID-19 healthcare administrators, policy makers and clinicians should utilize the systems approach to health literacy and invest in capacity building in health literacy for health care practitioners and the public.

Keywords: Health literacy; COVID-19; Healthcare system burden; Capacity building healthcare practitioners

Introduction

The World Health Organization (WHO) defines health literacy as “the cognitive and social skills which determine the motivation and ability of individuals to gain access to, understand, and use information in ways that promote and maintain good health” [1]. In the Caribbean and the Americas, where chronic Non Communicable Diseases are high, [2] explained that the inability to read, write, and use numbers effectively, is common and is associated with a wide range of adverse health outcomes in the region. Health literacy is therefore a valuable tool in the prevention of poor health choices leading to adverse health outcome among vulnerable populations.

The Effects of COVID-19

The corona virus/COVID-19 pandemic has severely disrupted the life and livelihood of many individuals throughout the world. This highly infectious disease has impacted the physical, mental, emotional, and financial wellbeing of most persons worldwide, and is being proven to be no respecter of age, race social status or creed. The COVID-19 crisis is a global public health emergency accounting for over 44 million confirmed cases and more than 1,000,000 deaths globally [3] and has disrupted and transformed the delivery of healthcare.

To combat the aggressive growth in the number of emerging cases, several strategies have been employed by public health administrators, policy makers, clinicians, researchers, and clients. These strategies require individuals to obtain and adapt health information from numerous sources (television, print, social media) and implement behavioral changes at a rapid pace. Though most information on COVID-19 is presented in a simple and easily understood manner, unfortunately, complex and sometimes false information pervade the “COVID-19 info-demic” which requires from individuals a degree of health literacy to be able to utilize the information correctly.

The effects of low/poor health literacy

The question therefore begs to be asked: Are people with low/poor health literacy at greater risk for contracting COVID-19? Health literacy is an important factor in pre-venting long-term conditions because low health literacy is correlated with unhealthy behaviors as

well as lower use of preventive services [4]. Persons experiencing disproportionately low or inadequate health literacy include those who are more disadvantaged socioeconomically, older people, people with long-term health conditions, and disabled people with long-term physical, mental, intellectual, or sensory impairment [5,6]. Studies have shown that persons that are more susceptible and highly likely to have a poor outcome to contracting the COVID-19 virus are older individuals > 65 years old, non-whites and individuals with underlying medical conditions [7].

The relationship between COVID-19 and Health Literacy

The striking overlap in the characteristics of individuals with low/poor health literacy and the persons adversely affected by COVID-19 cannot be overlooked or underestimated as the COVID-19 pandemic requires the preparation of individuals for rapid health and lifestyle behavioral adjustments. As the COVID-19 pandemic continues to overwhelm the healthcare system, prevention remains the optimal solution.

Addressing health literacy and health communication, especially among our vulnerable population can significantly address health inequity that pervades the healthcare system and mitigate the effects of low/poor health literacy. In this fight against COVID-19 healthcare administrators, policy makers and clinicians should utilize the systems approach to health literacy and invest in capacity building in health literacy for health care practitioners and the public.

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