

Four out of 10 people in Ireland have low health literacy

Irish findings of first ever EU Health Literacy Survey announced at launch of Health Literacy Awards today

Dublin, 27th November 2011- Four out of 10 people (39%) in Ireland have inadequate or problematic health literacy according to the first ever European Health Literacy Survey. The survey was carried out by University College Dublin for Ireland and funded by the EU Commission and the Department of Health. Vulnerable groups such as those experiencing long term illness, financial hardship and those from lower-socio-economic groups were seen to have the lowest levels of health literacy. Low levels of health literacy results in poorer health, poor quality of self-care and self management of disease, ineffective use of the health service and a decreased ability to advocate for oneself in the healthcare arena.

Health literacy involves a person having the skills to understand basic health information whether they receive it in writing, in person or over the phone. It also involves a person having the knowledge to understand their treatment options and make informed decisions about their own health.

The survey marks the first time that health literacy levels have ever been measured in Ireland. Ireland is not alone in its health literacy problem - nearly every second person (46%) across the participating eight European countries was shown to have low or problematic health literacy.

The announcement of the survey results was made at the launch of the fifth annual Crystal Clear MSD Health Literacy Awards, which are designed to recognise and reward excellence in health literacy in the healthcare sector. For more information on the awards and the health literacy survey, visit www.healthliteracy.ie.

Commenting on the results, Dr Gerardine Doyle, Principal Investigator for Ireland, stated: "One of the key findings of the study is that there is a strong relationship between health literacy and education, those with lower education have a lower level of health literacy. This has important implications for the development and integration of health matters in the school curricula from the earliest stages of education. "

"These results are welcome in that we can now quantify the problem with regard to health literacy, the impact it is having on the health of our population and the need for further education in this area. The results show that over 17% of people have difficulty understanding leaflets that accompany medicines and almost 20% of people would find it difficult to understand what to do in a medical emergency - thus demonstrating that the levels of low health literacy are having a real impact on a day to day basis. Medical care and interacting with the health service is become increasingly complex and this data will further draw the attention of policy makers to the issue of health literacy. I would encourage anyone who would like to improve their health literacy to make contact with their local VEC adult literacy service or NALA at 1800 20 20 65. " Commented Inez Bailey, Director, National Adult Literacy Agency (NALA).

According to the EU Health Literacy Survey report, at an individual level, the report is advising that low health literacy be addressed by educating the Irish public and increasing their personal health literacy and also by making the tasks and situations involved in the health system less demanding.

Also speaking at the launch was Ciara O'Rourke, Director, External Affairs, MSD who added, "Clear communications is critical to help patients make informed decisions about their own health. From the nearly 450 entries we have received into the Crystal Clear MSD Health Literacy Awards since 2007, it is clear that great strides have already been made in this area. I encourage those working in the health sector to enter the 2012 awards and share their Best Practice with colleagues across Ireland".

The Crystal Clear MSD Health Literacy Awards were developed to recognise and reward the excellent work already being done in the healthcare sector to address the issue of health literacy. The Awards are open to anyone who works in the healthcare sector who is improving health literacy by communicating more clearly and making information and services more accessible to patients. Since the Awards were launched in 2007, nearly 450 entries have been received from GPs, practice managers, consultants, nurses, receptionists, advocacy groups, and pharmacists across Ireland. The closing date for entries is Friday, 27th January 2012. Entries can be made online at www.healthliteracy.ie.

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References available upon request.

About the EU Health Literacy Survey

The HLS-EU was conducted between 4th of July and the 27th of July 2011 by TNS Opinion & Social at the request of the HLS-EU consortium. In Ireland there were 255 sampling points in total and 54 professional interviewers conducted the research. In total, 1005 individuals were interviewed in the Republic of Ireland, 431 (42.9%) were male and 574 (57.1%) were female. The age profile of respondents ranged from 15 years of age to 91 years of age, with an average respondent age of 45 years. Interviews ranged in length from 12 to 41 minutes with an average interview length of 22 minutes.

The HLS-EU Consortium

The HLS-EU project is carried out in cooperation with eight European project partners, and a number of collaborating partners. The consortium brings together members from various backgrounds including public health, psychology, education, sociology, accounting, and medicine. The project partners are:

- University College Dublin, National University of Ireland
- Maastricht University, the Netherlands
- National School of Public Health, Greece
- Ludwig Boltzmann Gesellschaft GmbH, Austria
- Instytut Kardiologii, Poland
- University of Murcia, Spain
- Medical University - Sofia, Bulgaria
- Landesinstitut für Gesundheit und Arbeit des Landes Nordrhein-Westfalen

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National Adult Literacy Agency (NALA)

The National Adult Literacy Agency is an independent membership organisation, concerned with developing policy, advocacy, research and offering advisory services in adult literacy work in Ireland. NALA was established in 1980 and has campaigned since then for the recognition of, and responses to, the adult literacy issue in Ireland. According to the last international survey, one in four Irish adults has difficulties reading and writing. For example, they may not be able to health information or fill out forms.

With this in mind, a lot of NALA's work involves developing policies and practices that reduce literacy-related barriers to accessing information – specifically in public services and the health sector. This has involved working with a number of government departments in training staff in literacy awareness and producing publications in plain English. As its focus is on everyday language, plain English is a style of presenting information that helps someone understand it the first time they read or hear it.