

BERKSHIRE MEDICAL JOURNAL

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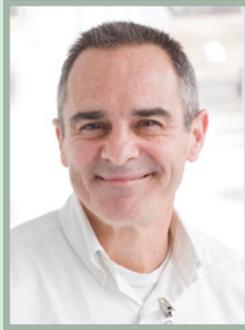
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EDITOR'S COLUMN



MARK PETTUS, MD, FACP

In this edition of The Berkshire Medical Journal we have an article from our colleagues at The Canyon Ranch Institute (CRI). We have had collaboration with CRI for three years as we continue to bring more robust multidimensional wellness education and tools to those in greatest need in the communities we serve.

The CRI has established an evidence-based 12-week program that addresses fundamental needs of individuals confronting substantial health challenges as they struggle to gain traction in their lives. It is a holistic model that integrates physical, emotional, spiritual, and mental dimensions of life and living. Key components of this model are health literacy and health equity. This edition of BMJ includes an article on assisting individuals with more effective communication strategies with their health care providers. It was written by CRI's Chuck Palm, M.P.H., CPH. Chuck is a Senior Program Manager for Canyon Ranch Institute, working with CRI partners to initiate and sustain CRI Life Enhancement Programs and CRI Healthy Gardens in communities around the country.

Also in this edition of the BMJ we include several abstracts and poster presentations by our residents and their teaching faculty. These cases are very interesting and are an important dimension of scholarly activity that is central to all aspects of medical and nursing education here at BMC.

Please feel free to submit any literature that can be highlighted in future BMJ publications.

Enjoy the summer season!

Mark C. Pettus MD, FACP

Director, Medical Education, Wellness and Population Health

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The editors will consider original articles from Berkshire County and other interested physicians, dentists and allied health professionals. These articles should focus on practical aspects of medical science or on current concepts and research developments in medicine or dentistry. Articles and related illustrative materials should be sent to Mark Pettus, MD, Editor, Berkshire Medical Journal, Office of Medical Education, Berkshire Medical Center, 725 North Street, Pittsfield, MA, or by email to mpettus@bhs1.org.

Double spaced, typewritten copies of five to ten pages in length will be considered for publication. Camera-ready or computer file illustrations, tables, or graphs are also encouraged. All manuscripts will be reviewed by three referees in appropriate fields of medicine.

Use separate pages for the title page, with authors' names and affiliations, an abstract, tables, figures, legends and bibliographic references. The format of the National Library of Medicine should be used for references. (Please do not use the footnote function of the word processing program.) Authors will be notified by the editorial board action four to six weeks after the manuscript is received. Authors of accepted manuscripts are asked to supply a copy of the accepted version electronically. Authors will be advised about format.

Letters to the editor, book reviews, abstracts, brief clinical reports and professional achievements/recognition information are also welcomed and encouraged.

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MAKING HEALTHCARE BETTER FOR EVERYONE

USING HEALTH LITERACY TO IMPROVE SYSTEMS AND OUTCOMES

By Andrew Pleasant, PhD, Senior Director for Health Literacy and Research, Canyon Ranch Institute;
Chuck Palm, MPH, CPH, Senior Program Manager, Canyon Ranch Institute;
Jennifer Cabe, MA, Executive Director and Board Member, Canyon Ranch Institute

A lot can go wrong when two people are in a room talking about health and medicine, especially if one of those people is a healthcare professional.

Often, people who may not be feeling well and who don't have the benefit of a medical education have to experience the added challenge of trying to understand what their healthcare professional is saying. This challenge is often a result of healthcare professionals and health systems unintentionally creating obstacles to understanding. Other times, they are the result of an individual patient's health literacy skills.

The result is that meeting with a healthcare professional, such as a doctor or nurse, can sometimes be more confusing than helpful. People may not be fully prepared to ask questions, or are not given enough time to ask questions, or aren't reminded to write down the answers so they can share the advice with their family and friends. Healthcare professionals can often speak in medical jargon, including acronyms, or use scientific words that most people were never taught and shouldn't be expected to master right away. As a result, people may not even know why they've been prescribed a particular medication or what they're supposed to do next. The results of these confusing conversations are significant – including people being re-admitted to a hospital after they are discharged.

This situation is costing the United States dearly – not only in money but in needless suffering and wasted energy.

Every visit with a healthcare professional is an opportunity for people to find, understand, evaluate, communicate, and use information to advance their health literacy and make informed decisions. A healthcare professional can be a partner and an educator to help people not only when



they're sick and need treatment, but also when they're healthy and want to stay healthy through prevention.

The average face-to-face visit with healthcare professionals is less than 15 minutes. That reality often means that healthcare professionals are motivated to get to the "primary concern" of the patient as quickly as possible. In fact, physicians in one study listened

for an average of only 23.1 seconds before jumping in and "redirecting" the conversation away from what the person was telling them about themselves.

An integrative approach to health and healthcare, grounded in the best practices of health literacy, is one that prioritizes getting to know the whole person, not just treating a person as a symptom. The causes of poor health are many and complex. That means that 23.1 seconds is not enough time to truly learn the causes of someone's poor health, or even all of the symptoms that have caused a person to seek the help of a healthcare professional.

The challenge is real. A national survey found that 88% of Americans are below the proficient level in health literacy. Hundreds of studies demonstrate that most health materials are written beyond the comprehension skills of most Americans.

How would you start a conversation to truly learn about someone's health and well-being? Winston Wong, M.D., of Kaiser Permanente suggests asking, "What does a good day mean to you?"

There are many other steps we can all take to help address the challenge of health literacy – whether we are in a role as a healthcare professional or we're seeking help to improve our own health or the health of a loved one.

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Tips for people to help prepare for a visit with a healthcare professional:

- Write down your questions before you go to the appointment, so you won't forget to ask something important.
- Make a list of any bad things you may be feeling, such as stomachache, fever, or feeling sad all the time.
- Make a list of all the medicines you are taking. Be sure to include the amount of medicine (such as number of pills), as well as when, how, and why you do or do not take the medicine. Bring all the medicines and supplements, like herbal supplements, vitamins, or other drugs that you take.
- Bring a friend or family member to your health care appointment, and ask that person to help you remember to ask questions and also take notes for you.
- Be open and honest with your healthcare professional.
- Tell your healthcare professional anything new that you have been doing, such as eating differently, taking any new medicines, smoking, drinking alcohol, or starting a new exercise program.
- Tell your healthcare professional about any big life changes, such as a new job, moving into a new house, the death of a close friend or cherished pet, a new romantic relationship, or anything else that has caused you stress. Remember, stress can be the result of very sad or very happy events.
- Take notes! Write down the answers to your questions, as well as anything else you need to remember. If possible, bring a trustworthy person to take notes for you.
- Get a copy of all your medical records, and keep track of all your diagnoses, medications, and next appointments.
- Get your health care professional's contact information.
- Use the Teach-Back technique. Repeat back what your health care professional has said and check if you've understood correctly. Do this check by asking the health care professional to repeat something that you may not have understood or heard correctly.
- Follow up. Try to do what the health care professional recommends. Call back if you're confused about any instructions or information, if you don't feel better, or if you have new symptoms.
- Don't be afraid to get a second opinion from another health care professional to clearly understand the problem and to understand all your treatment choices. Ask your health insurance plan, local hospital, medical society, or medical school for ideas about whom to contact for a second opinion.
- Make sure your needs are met. Don't be demanding, accusative, angry, or fearful. Don't lie about your health. Do speak up for yourself and ask questions about everything you may not understand. If you find you don't like the health care professional you are working with – find another one!

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Tips for healthcare professionals on preparing for visits:

- Use the Teach-Back Technique to help people find, understand, evaluate, communicate, and use health information to make informed decisions about their own health.
- Ask the person you are with what they know about health and their specific healthcare issue so that you can give the best information in the best manner. Remember, it's not a test! Say, for example, "Tell me what you've heard about (whatever the topic is)."
- Help correct any misunderstandings immediately. Always give your patient correct, understandable, and actionable information.
- Ask the person you are with to Teach-Back what you have explained. Say, for example, "I want to be sure I explained everything clearly. Can you please explain it back to me so I can be sure I did a good job explaining everything to you?" Or "Tell me, when you go back home, how will you tell your (spouse, friend, partner, child) about what we've talked about today?" Another effective Teach-Back question is "We've gone over a lot of information today. So tell me, please, what are some things that you might do differently now?"
- Ask the person you are with, "What questions do you have?" instead of yes/no questions like, "Have I answered all your questions?" or "Do you have any questions?" These can be difficult for a person to respond to because it may seem like a challenge to the healthcare professional's skills.
- Introduce or re-introduce yourself as a "partner in your health and wellness," or a "collaborator in living a healthy life." When you do this, describe how you can and will be their partner and collaborator. Importantly, you must mean this and be able to deliver on your promise.
- Identify yourself as a resource for helping to identify healthy goals.
- Set the tone with body language by making your eye level the same as the person you are with, and by not having a desk or other equipment, like a laptop computer, between you.
- Look at the person you are working with, not at your computer screen.
- Don't interrupt people before they have a chance to get to what they feel is the real problem. Ask for more information, if needed, before moving to what you feel is the "main problem." One study found that, on average, Americans spend 30 minutes with a health care professional each year. You need to make the most of that time.
- Come to agreement on at least one health goal during the visit. The goal should be SMART: Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Relevant, and Time-bound. Identify specific, concrete steps for your patient to take after the visit.
- Ask the person you are with how they like to learn. In addition to using words, be prepared to use diagrams, pictures, models, handouts, and other examples as you discuss their health.
- Focus on prevention as much as treatment, providing examples of how the person can change their behaviors to improve their health.
- Address the social and environmental determinants of health, not just the symptoms or diagnoses. Have a handout available of community resources, and be prepared to make referrals to outside community organizations that are equipped to help with social needs like housing, food, and behavioral health.

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All people need to be active, informed, and prepared champions of their own health and wellness. This is equally true in their daily lives as it is whenever they meet with a healthcare professional. Healthcare professionals may be experts in their fields, and they may know a lot about the people they help already, but being prepared and making informed decisions about health takes everyone's participation.

We propose that there are eight questions everyone should be able to answer about their own health. So whether you are working as a healthcare professional to help someone else or just in considering your own health – make sure you and the people you are working with can answer these eight questions about health:

1. What health problems do I have?
2. Why are those health problems important to me?
3. What should I do about my health problems?
4. Where do I go for any tests, medicine, and appointments that I need next?
5. How should I take my medicine?
6. Who do I call with questions?
7. When should I see a healthcare professional next?
8. How should I change my lifestyle?

Good health is the result of a partnership between people, their families, their neighborhoods and communities, and their team of healthcare professionals. That means health happens not only in a clinic or a hospital, but throughout a person's life. Healthcare professionals – and the health system overall – need to move more strongly in the direction of integrating all of people's lives into their health decision-making.

Healthcare professionals need to focus not only on a person's body, but also on their mind, spirit, and emotions. In this way, and only in this way, can health become a resource people use to live happy and productive lives, rather than to simply see health as the absence of disease.

About Canyon Ranch Institute:

Canyon Ranch Institute (CRI) is a 501(c)3 non-profit charity that catalyzes the possibility of optimal health for all people by translating the best practices of Canyon Ranch and our partners to help educate, inspire, and empower every person to prevent disease and embrace a life of wellness. In 2013, CRI partnered with Berkshire Health Systems (BHS), a not-for-profit organization serving the Berkshires region through a network of affiliates. Together, BHS and CRI developed a Canyon Ranch Institute Life Enhancement Program (CRI LEP) for residents of Berkshire County. The BHS-CRI LEP is established at two sites: the first in Pittsfield at Berkshire Medical Center, and the second in Great Barrington at Fairview Hospital. A third site is in development in North Adams. The BHS-CRI LEP prevents chronic disease by advancing health literacy, and improving nutrition, physical activity, stress management, and life balance through an integrative approach to health and wellness. As individuals learn to make healthier choices, they often share their healthy choices and knowledge with their friends, families, and community.

CRI has also offered health literacy and integrative health trainings to BHS staff, and we are constantly exploring innovative, evidence-based ways to collaboratively produce better health outcomes in Berkshire County through cost-effective and ethical approaches.

You can learn more about Canyon Ranch Institute at www.canyonranchinstitute.org.

Resources:

The Calgary Charter on Health Literacy – http://www.centreforliteracy.qc.ca/sites/default/files/CFL_Calgary_Charter_2011.pdf

The National Academy of Medicine Roundtable on Health Literacy - <http://www.nationalacademies.org/hmd/Activities/PublicHealth/HealthLiteracy.aspx>

The AHRQ Health Literacy Universal Precautions Toolkit - <http://www.ahrq.gov/professionals/quality-patient-safety/quality-resources/tools/literacy-toolkit/index.html>

Ottawa Charter on Health Promotion - <http://www.who.int/healthpromotion/conferences/previous/ottawa/en/>

