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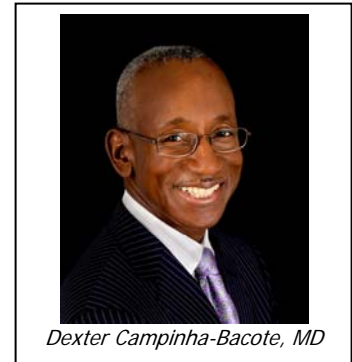
## **EXTRA EDITION** **October is Health Literacy Month**

### **Time to Promote the Use of Plain Language**

*By Dexter L. Campinha-Bacote, MD, Medical Director, Aetna*

**Health literacy:** “The degree to which individuals have the capacity to obtain, process, and understand basic health information and services needed to make appropriate health decisions.”

-- Source: *Healthy People 2010*



Happy Health Literacy Month! We are pleased to share an extra edition of *Monthly Health Watch* in honor of this topic.

### **A big problem**

The statistics are cause for alarm. As many as 90 million Americans cannot understand basic health care information. Low health literacy:

- Lowers the chances of successful treatment
- Increases the risk of medical errors
- Affects a person's ability to understand health information
- Impacts some people's attempts to access the health care system
- Can lead to higher health care costs

Low health literacy is associated with poorer control of blood sugar and a higher risk of stroke in people with type 2 diabetes. People with low health literacy are less likely to seek out preventive health services like the flu shot. (They are 40% less likely to get one.) And people who cannot read a drug label may take too much or too little medication.

Minorities, the elderly and recent immigrants can have an especially hard time understanding and acting on health information. We estimate that about half of our members face the same challenge.

### **Building awareness of health literacy**

To help address the problem, we formed a workgroup to find ways to communicate more clearly. Aetna's Chief Medical Office, Lonny Reisman, MD, co-leads this group.

This month, we stress the importance of health literacy to our employees. But we promote health literacy all year long. Here are some of our past and current activities:

- Sent text messages to doctors on this topic
- Studied the value of educational materials written in plain language
- Studying how health literacy affects chronic disease
- Looking at people who leave the emergency department to find out if they understand their discharge instructions

## Taking action to improve health literacy

### ***What is “plain language”?***

According to the National Institutes of Health, plain language features:

- Common, everyday words (except for necessary technical terms)
- Personal pronouns (“we” and “you”)
- Active voice
- Logical organization
- An easy-to-read format that includes using bullets, tables and lots of white space

Dr. Reisman recently told Aetna’s employees: “Writing and speaking in plain language can make a big difference in the lives of our members. We can help them understand their health and health care. If they don’t understand their treatment, they might not follow it. And we know that medication compliance is important to maintaining good health.”

To help our members and other consumers, we have taken the following steps:

- Launched a [new and improved website](#) that explains our products and services in simpler terms
- [Released](#) the second edition of *Navigating Your Health Benefits For Dummies* to help consumers understand and maximize health benefits ([Free copies](#) available upon request)
- Offer cultural competency training to health care professionals
- Are revising our member letters to be easier to read
- Are improving our Explanation of Benefits statements to make them as simple to understand as a bank statement
- Provide a quarterly newsletter to Aetna employees with tips for communicating more clearly with consumers
- Created a company standard to have consumer materials written at the 5<sup>th</sup> grade reading level and train employees to write at this level

Plus, Aetna and AARP have made health literacy a priority as part of a broader relationship. They have made materials available to members that are written at or below an 8<sup>th</sup> grade reading level.

### ***Six tips for consumer-friendly writing***

These guidelines help Aetna’s employees make their communications more consumer-friendly:

1. **Write the way you speak.**  
Use a conversational tone, as if you are talking with your neighbor.
2. **Address the needs of the reader.**  
Make sure the benefit to the reader is clear. Include any next steps the reader should take.
3. **Use short words.**
4. **Focus on one topic at a time.**  
If you throw too much at readers, they quit reading.
5. **Anticipate reader questions.**  
Expect them to want to know the reason for the communication, and what they have to do.
6. **Use familiar words.**  
Avoid acronyms and medical jargon. If you must use an uncommon word, explain it with a familiar one.

## Talking with your doctor

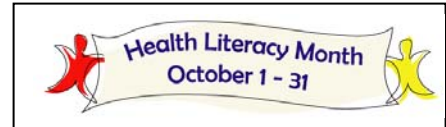
A conversation with your doctor should be clear. But many people leave their doctor's office more confused than when they arrived. Doctors use words we don't hear everyday. And if English is your second language, you may have an even harder time understanding what is going on.

Poor communication between a patient and doctor can lead to trouble. You may be sent for tests you don't need. Or your doctor may have a hard time figuring out what is causing your health problem. That's why it is important that you take action to understand your doctor.

[PlanforYourHealth.com](#) helps people better understand health benefits and the link to financial well-being. The site offers tips for making the most of doctor visits. [English](#) tips. [Spanish](#) tips. (Aetna produces the site with the Financial Planning Association.)

## Featured website:

This is the 11th year of celebrating Health Literacy Month. Helen Osborne and a team of health literacy advocates started it in 1999. This year's theme is "Why Health Literacy Matters: Sharing Our Stories in Words, Pictures, and Sound." Visit [www.healthliteracymonth.org](http://www.healthliteracymonth.org) to find a new health literacy story each day in October.



## A final note

This special edition of *Monthly Health Watch* originally scored at a 9<sup>th</sup> grade reading level. That's fine for some readers. But a good "plain language" goal is to write at about a 5<sup>th</sup> or 6<sup>th</sup> grade reading level. More people can understand the content. And when the topic is as vital as health care, that's important. The final version of this newsletter scores at a 6<sup>th</sup> grade reading level.

### ***Tip: Check your reading level***

Use Microsoft Word to check the reading grade level of all documents you create or review.

First, make sure your settings are ready. In Microsoft Word:

1. Go to **Tools**. Choose **Options**.
2. Choose the **Spelling & Grammar** tab.
3. Check the bottom two boxes: **Check grammar with spelling** and **Show readability statistics**.

You're all set! The next time you run your Word spellchecker (Tools, then Spelling & Grammar), a window will pop up with your reading level "score." (It's the bottom number.)