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Using Language that Our Patients Can Understand: Cultivating Simple Language Use in our Medical and Physician Assistant Students

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Using Language that Out Patients Can Understand: Cultivating Simple Language Use in Our Medical and Physician Assistant Students

Jennifer Benson, MD, Director Doctoring 1 course

Special thanks to Kathryn Anderson and Sarah Leister from the UNM Health Literacy office.
It is important for clinicians to use simple language with patients as only 12% (!!!!!) of US adults have proficient literacy.

2003 National Assessment of Adult Literacy, US Department of Education
Literacy challenges affect all racial and ethnic groups.

- White: 14% Below Basic, 58% Below Basic, 19% Basic, 9% Intermediate, 0% Proficient
- Black: 2% Below Basic, 41% Below Basic, 33% Basic, 24% Intermediate, 0% Proficient
- Hispanic: 4% Below Basic, 31% Below Basic, 41% Basic, 21% Intermediate, 0% Proficient
- Other: 12% Below Basic, 54% Below Basic, 21% Basic, 13% Intermediate, 0% Proficient
Health Literacy is the ability to understand oral and written language [in one’s mother tongue] in order to engage in one’s own healthcare.
Low Health Literacy is associated with adverse health outcomes.
Health Literacy Levels
- Quartile 4 (highest)
- Quartile 3
- Quartile 2
- Quartile 1 (lowest)
Patients are sick, overwhelmed, confused and feeling vulnerable. Simple language use is for everyone!
Joint Commision recommends communication with patients target the 5\textsuperscript{th} grade reading level or lower.

Rosa Parks was born February 4, 1913 in Tuskegee, Alabama. She spent her childhood in Alabama. When she was 11, she enrolled in the Montgomery Industrial School for Girls. Later, she worked as a seamstress in Montgomery.
Words and phrases we use commonly are a problem.

Compiled from:
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iCvQyRhpI4Q
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ImnlptxIMXs
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BgTuD7f7LG8
I identified an opportunity: UNM School of Medicine did not have a Health Literacy curriculum.

I initially focused on first year medical students, to preserve their ability to recognize and use simple language.
“Translating” medical documents into “plain language” increases medical student use of simple language during simulated patient encounters.
In 2018, I debuted a “translating into plain language” session for the UNM first year medical and physician assistant students, in the Doctoring 1 course.

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Assessment:

In addition to ongoing language monitoring by preceptors during simulated clinical encounters, the first written exam asked students to “translate” the following sentence, replacing the words in bold with simpler words.

“Please **discontinue** your **current hypertension medication** as it is **causing lower extremity edema**. I’m going to give you an **alternate medication** that won’t have this **adverse consequence**.”

“Please stop taking the pills you have now for your high blood pressure because they are making your legs puffy. I’m going to give you a different pill to take instead that won’t have this problem.”
Next steps:
• Add a Health Literacy activity to the second year of school
• Ongoing assessment/reinforcement strategies