

Communicating Health Information: A Needs Assessment of Health Professionals in PEI

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Communicating Health Information: A Needs Assessment of Health Professionals in PEI

Executive Summary

“Some patients ask questions that indicate the basic info was misunderstood and therefore everything I said and build on was missed and not helpful!”

~ Quote from a health professional

This research is a needs assessment of health professionals when communicating health information. It compliments our previous research project, *Health Information Needs of Adult Learners in PEI*. The intent of this research is to create a snapshot of the issues facing health professionals when communicating with patients.

We surveyed 99 health professionals in PEI and have summarized the findings in this report as well as in the charts in the attachments section. Overall our findings indicate that many health professionals are unaware of the scope of the problem of low health literacy. Very few professionals have received training in how to communicate with patients with low literacy skills. Doctors received the least amount of training. There also seems to be a lack of communication tools available that are presented in plain language or that are hands-on or visual. The major challenge for health professionals is the lack of time they have with patients.

When we asked health professionals for their ideas on what would help them communicate better, they said they needed more training, more tools, and more time with patients.

This research gives us additional evidence and guidance to create recommendations for provincial policy makers. We plan to collaborate with stakeholders before finalizing our recommendations in the spring of 2009.

Project Description

Background

The PEI Literacy Alliance held a Health and Literacy Summit in March 2007. Participants represented adult learners, health professionals, community workers, and health policy people. During the Summit, important discussions took place across these sectors. There was a consensus that before we could move forward with recommendations for policy makers, we should have a needs assessment specific to PEI.

In December 2007, we completed a *Health Information Needs Assessment of Adult Learners* (see attachment 1 for summary of this research).

Essentially they told us they need health information to be communicated in plain language and in a variety of forms. They also said they need more time with the health professional and more support in understanding health information.

This project looks at the other side of the situation. It is a needs assessments of health professionals in communicating health information

Target Audience:

We chose to look at the needs of a wide variety of health professionals including: Doctors, pharmacists, speech language pathologists, nurses, therapists, medical secretaries, social workers, occupational therapists and dieticians.

Methodology

We formed an advisory committee to help guide our research. Members of the committee are:

- Donna Murnaghan, Associate Professor, UPEI School of Nursing
- Mary Jean McCarthy, Assistant Professor, UPEI School of Nursing
- Rod Stanley, Communications Officer, PEI Department of Health
- Charlotte Comrie, CEO, Heart and Stroke Foundation of PEI
- Nishka Smith, Evaluator, Atlantic Evaluation Group

- Catherine O'Bryan, Executive Director, PEI Literacy Alliance
- Norm Finlayson, Health Literacy Coordinator, PEI Literacy Alliance
- Jinny Greaves, Researcher, PEI Literacy Alliance

There are many different kinds of health professionals and they all have busy schedules. To encourage input from as many professions as possible, we decided to use a short survey to gather our data. Another reason for choosing the survey was that it made the information easy to analyze. (See attachment 2 – Survey)

The questions were designed to give us information about:

- awareness of the rates of low health literacy among health professionals
- communication tools health professionals use and how well they work
- experiences when communicating with patients with low literacy
- challenges health professionals face when communicating with patients
- suggestions for what would help health professionals communicate better

We distributed the survey to:

- participants of the Primary Care Health Promotion Workshop
- PEI Primary Care Coordinators
- our health contacts from previous events

Our goal was to get at least 30 surveys back. We exceeded this goal and received 99 surveys. Chart 1 (See attachment 4) shows the number and types of health professionals we surveyed.

Research Goals

1. To define the needs of health professionals when communicating health information
2. To create a list of suggestions from health professionals on how to improve the communication of health information

Limitations of Research

We received more surveys from some health professionals than others. For example we received 42 surveys from nurses and only 10 from doctors and 9 from pharmacists.

The data collected from larger groups may be more reliable than data collected from smaller groups.

The research is intended only to create a snapshot of the needs of health professionals when communicating with patients. It is not meant to be an in-depth study of the situation.

Media Coverage

This report will be posted on our website at www.pei.literacy.ca. The press release (See attachment 3) will be sent to the Island's four major newspapers, our membership and our board members. We will also post the press release on our website and blog.

The Guardian newspaper interviewed the researcher on March 25th about this project. The reporter said the article will be printed on April 5th in the Saturday paper.

Key Findings

Our previous research work revealed to us that adult learners in PEI go to doctors and pharmacists first when looking for health information. For this reason, this report focuses on these health professionals. We also focus on nurses because we received so many surveys from them.

Health Literacy Awareness

We first asked health professionals to guess how many Islanders have low health literacy. More than half of all respondents underestimated the problem of health literacy in PEI. However, nurses most often guessed correctly, while doctors most often guessed too low. (See Chart 2)

Training

We then asked health professionals if they ever received training to communicate with patients with low literacy skills. Only a quarter answered yes and most of these people were nurses and pharmacists. Only 10% of doctors had received training. (See Chart 3)

Communication Tools

We asked health professionals what communication tools or strategies they use with patients. Not surprisingly, all said they used oral explanations. Most said they use written materials as well. Visual tools, such as pictures, were named as tools used by 82% of the surveyed health professionals. (See Chart 6)

More than 80% of pharmacists and nurses named demonstration tools compared to 50% of doctors.

Interestingly, every pharmacist surveyed said they use the teach-back method compare to only 40% of doctors and 69% of nurses. (See Chart 4)

Rating of communication tools

We also asked health professionals to rate the effectiveness of the communication tools they use. On average they rated written material and oral explanations as satisfactory. However, those that used visual tools, demonstrations and the teach-back method rated these tools higher. Many added that the most effective way to use communication tools was to use them in conjunction with others. (See Chart 5)

Experience with patients with low literacy

73% of all health professionals surveyed were aware of patients that had difficulty understanding health information. (See Chart 7)

Challenges

At least 90% of all doctors, nurses and pharmacists named lack of time as a key challenge to communicating effectively with patients about their health.

70% of doctors named lack of resources as a challenge which is 10% higher than the average and more than 30% higher than pharmacists.

Only 20% of doctors named lack of knowledge as a challenge compared to 50% of nurses and of 56% of pharmacists. (See Chart 8)

What the data suggests

Health professionals need training

3 out of 4 health professionals experienced having a patient who was struggling to understand health information. But, only 1 out of 4 received training in how to communicate with patients with low literacy skills.

In addition, doctors are least aware of the size of the problem of low health literacy. They also receive the least amount of training. However, only 20% of doctors named lack of knowledge as a challenge. This low percentage may be a result of doctors simply not being aware of the issue and that at least 60% of their patients have low health literacy skills.

Health professionals need better communication tools

Nurses and pharmacists use a wide variety of tools to communicate with patients, however many said that these tools could be improved by being more accessible. They also said the tools need to be more clear and simple.

Doctors also named lack of resources as a challenge more than other health professionals. This suggests that doctors may not have equal access to communication tools.

Health professionals need more time with patients

Lack of time is the largest challenge for all health professionals and perhaps even more so for doctors. Identifying patients with low literacy skills and using alternative communication tools and strategies to ensure they understand takes time. Many noted that they have had to re-write information from a pamphlet to make it easy to read. This takes a lot of time that many health professionals don't have available.

Suggestions for solutions

We asked health professionals “what would help you to communicate better with patients?” The common responses were to increase the following:

- time with patients
- training (how to teach effectively, how to use plain language, and knowledge of low literacy issues)
- tools (such as videos, pictures, hands-on models)
- financial resources
- handouts that are written in plain language and approved by the province
- opportunities to share experiences and techniques with co-workers
- support staff
- private space with patients

Conclusion

This research creates a snapshot of the issues facing health professionals and offers some suggestions to enhance communication with their patients.

Overall health professionals need to be made more aware of the issues of health literacy. They need more training in how to communicate with low literacy patients. They need more access to communication tools that use the principles of plain language. They also need visual tools like pictures and videos, and hands-on tools such as demonstrations and models.

Improving the way health information is presented has the potential to improve the health of many Islanders. Everyone has a better chance of being healthy and taking control of their health if they understand health information.

Next Steps

In the spring and summer of 2008, we plan to work on a needs assessment of seniors getting and using health information. Once this is complete, our goal is to present recommendations for provincial policy makers in the spring of 2009. This research as well as our past research will be the evidence on which our recommendations will be based on. Our long-term goal is to enhance health literacy on PEI.

Summary of Health Information Needs Assessment

December 2007

Why did we do this research?

Our goal was to identify the needs of people with low literacy skills in getting and using health information. We also wanted to learn ways health information could be communicated better. We will use this research as evidence to make recommendations to policy makers to improve health literacy.

Who did we talk to?

We focused on adult learners with level 2 literacy skills. We chose this group because they met our criteria of having low literacy and being easy to find. We had only 8 weeks to complete our research and this group was easy to access.

What did we do?

We held 4 focus groups across the Island. We talked to a total of 24 people. We asked participants 3 key questions:

1. When you need health information where do you go to get it and why?
2. What has been your experience been getting health information from?
3. How could health information be easier for you to get and use?

What did we hear?

Participants named doctors and pharmacists as their first source for health information.

Participants listed the following issues as determinants of their ability to get, understand and use health information:

“The doctor gave me just information to scare me”
~ Participant

1. **Time available** – how much time they had with a health professional
2. **How the information was presented** – what form or medium it was in
3. **Language used** - whether the health information was in plain language or not
4. **Support offered** - how much help they received in understanding and acting upon health information
5. **Accessibility of information** – how easy or hard it was to get the health information

Survey for Health Professionals

1. **What is your occupation?** _____
2. **Where do you work?** _____
3. **What percentage of Islanders would you say don't have the literacy skills needed to get, understand and use health information?**
☐ less than 15% ☐ 50%
☐ 30% ☐ 70%
4. **Have you received training to communicate with patients or clients with low literacy skills?**
☐ no ☐ yes, please explain _____

5. **What tools or strategies do you use to communicate health information to your patients?** (Please check as many as you use)
☐ Written materials
☐ Oral explanations
☐ Visual tools like videos or pictures
☐ Demonstrations
☐ Teach back method
(when you ask a patient to tell or show you what has been explained to them)
☐ Other, please explain _____

6. On a scale of 1 to 5, how have these tools or strategies worked?

1 = not at all - - - - - 5 = very well

Written Material ☐ 1 ☐ 2 ☐ 3 ☐ 4 ☐ 5

Please explain: _____

Oral explanations ☐ 1 ☐ 2 ☐ 3 ☐ 4 ☐ 5

Please explain: _____

Visual tools ☐ 1 ☐ 2 ☐ 3 ☐ 4 ☐ 5

Please explain: _____

Demonstrations ☐ 1 ☐ 2 ☐ 3 ☐ 4 ☐ 5

Please explain: _____

Teach back method ☐ 1 ☐ 2 ☐ 3 ☐ 4 ☐ 5

Please explain: _____

Other ☐ 1 ☐ 2 ☐ 3 ☐ 4 ☐ 5

Please explain: _____

7. Can you give us an example of a time when you felt a patient was having difficulty understanding health information?

☐ Yes ☐ No Example:

8. If you answered yes to questions 7, what follow-up steps did you take to ensure their understanding?

9. What obstacles or challenges do you face when communicating health information to patients? (please check as many that apply)

- | | |
|--|---|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Limited time | <input type="checkbox"/> Limited knowledge of how to support learning for low literacy patients |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Limited resources | <input type="checkbox"/> Not sure |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Limited tools | <input type="checkbox"/> None |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Other, please explain | |

10. What would help you communicate health information better?

11. Are you interested in receiving a copy of the findings from this survey? If so, please write your contact information here. We will not share this information with anyone.

Please return your completed survey no later than March 15 by:

- Fax - 902-368-3269
- Mail - Please use the enclosed stamped envelope

Thank you!

Attachment 3

For Immediate Release
April 1, 2008

PEI Health Professionals Face Challenges

When you visit a health professional, do you understand everything you are told? If not, your health may pay the price.

A new report from the PEI Literacy Alliance tells us about the challenges that face health professionals.

If you are like more than 60% of Islanders, chances are you have some difficulty understanding health information. "All too often health information is presented using medical jargon. There is little time to ask questions," says Alliance researcher Jinny Greaves. "When you are sick and anxious it is hard to take in new information."

The Literacy Alliance surveyed 99 health professionals in PEI including pharmacists, doctors, nurses, dieticians, therapists, and medical secretaries.

Lack of time with patients was the biggest challenge. Also 3 out of 4 respondents underestimated the number of Islanders that have difficulty understanding health information. Only 1 out of 4 has training in how to communicate with patients with low literacy skills.

When asked what would help them communicate better with patients, health professionals said more time with patients, more training, and more communication tools. They need more handouts that are in plain language, more pictures, videos and hands-on models to help them explain health matters to patients.

"By improving the way health information is presented we have the potential to improve the health of many Islanders," says Jinny Greaves.

This research was sponsored in part by the Adult Learning Knowledge Centre.

For a copy of the report visit www.pei.literacy.ca or call the PEI Literacy Alliance at 368-3620.

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Contact Person: Jinny Greaves, Researcher, PEI Literacy Alliance,
Phone number: 368-1810
Alternate number: 368-3620

Attachment 4 - Charts

Chart 1

99 Health Professionals in PEI were Surveyed

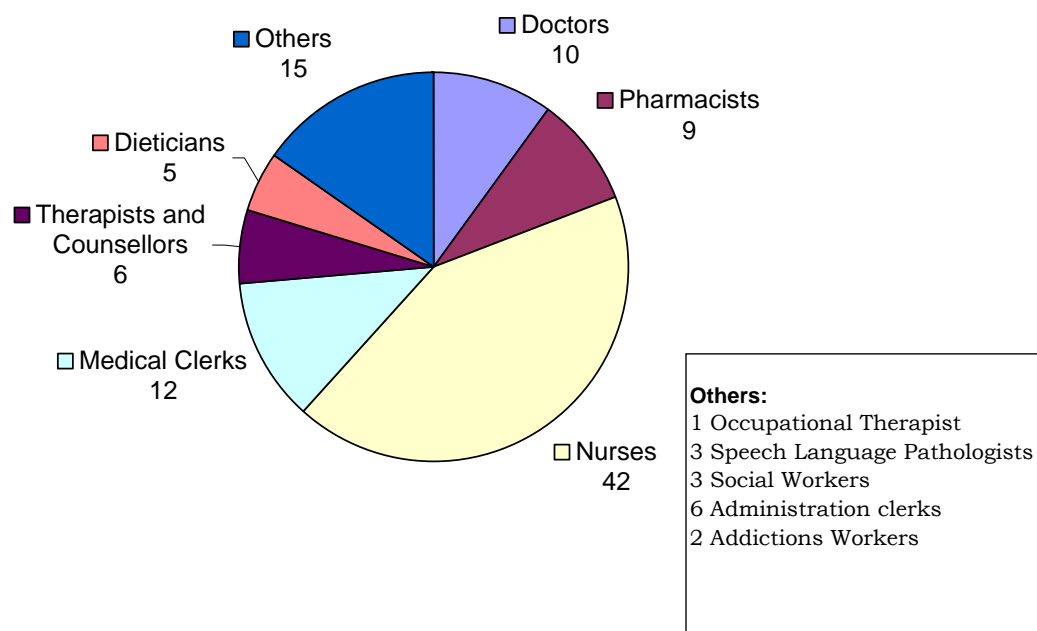


Chart 2

Health professionals who underestimated the problem of health literacy in PEI

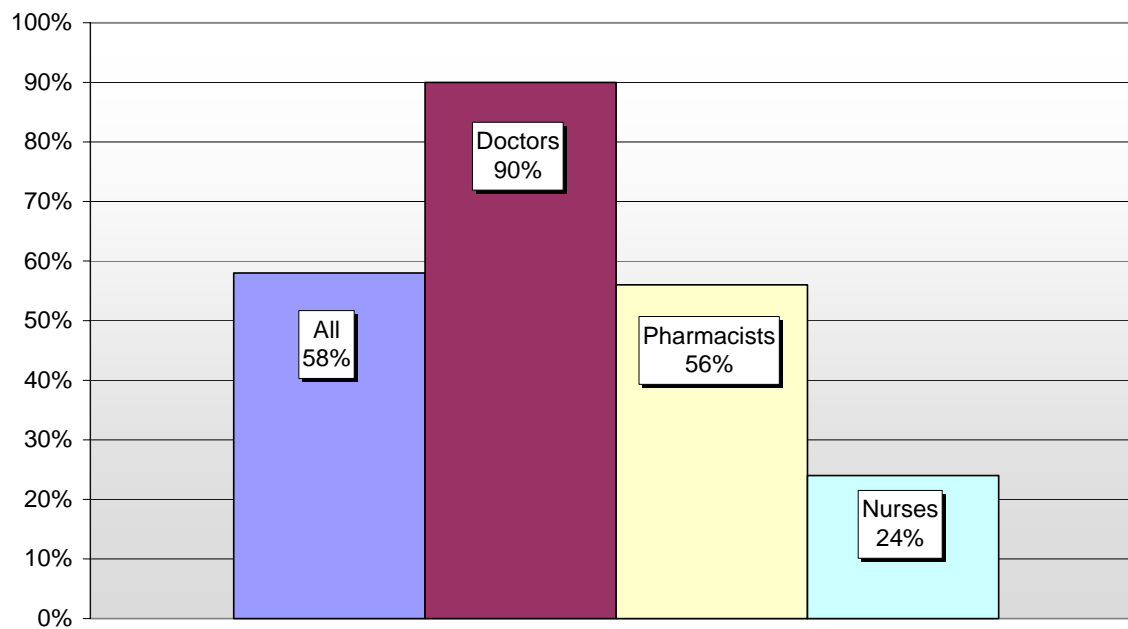


Chart 3

Health professionals who had training to communicate with patients with low literacy skills

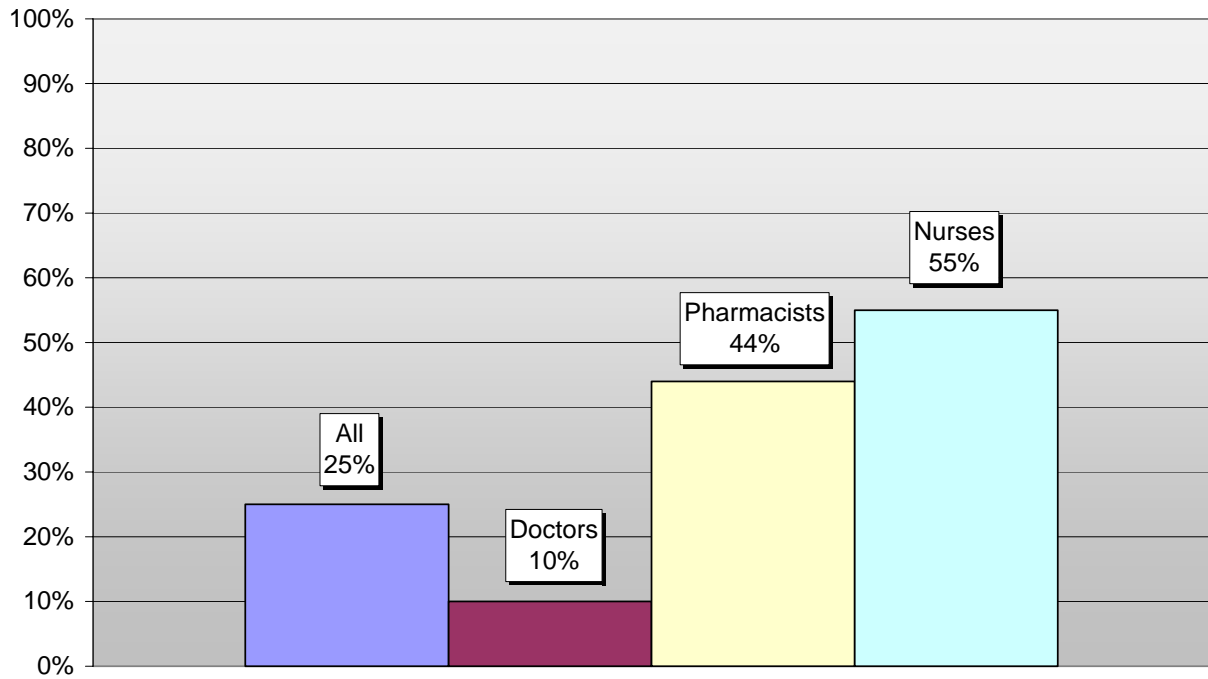


Chart 4

Communication tools that health professionals use

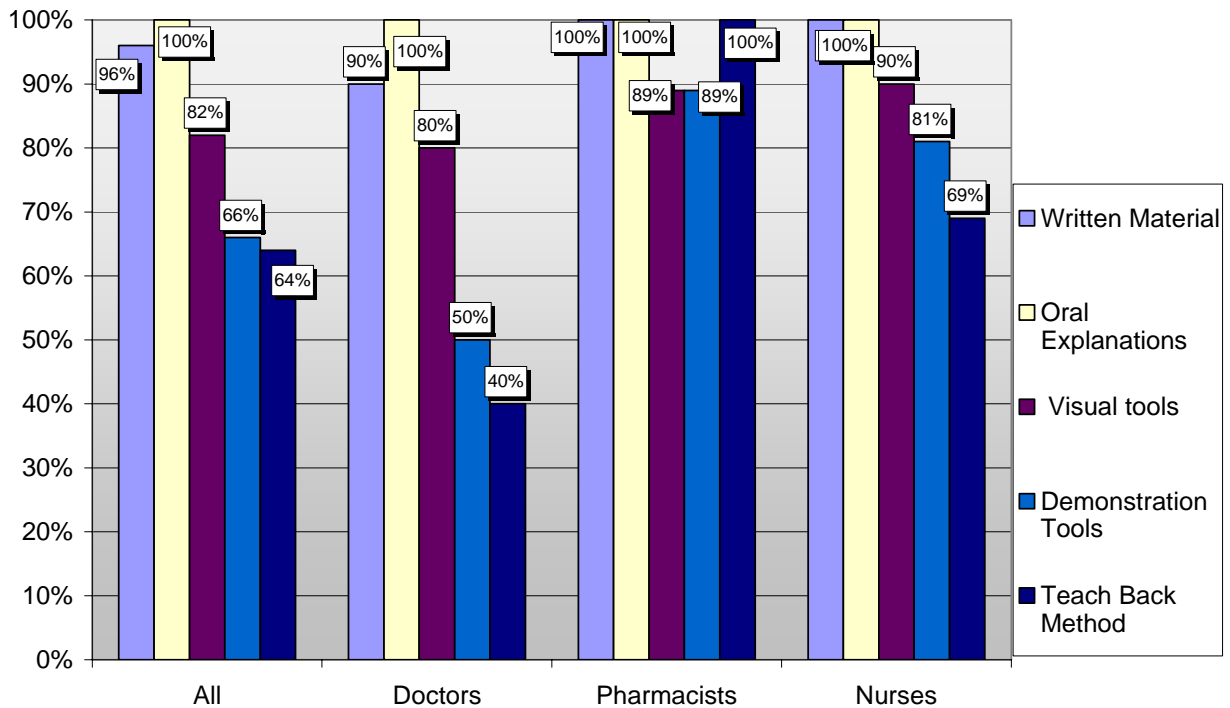


Chart 5
Rating of Communication Tools

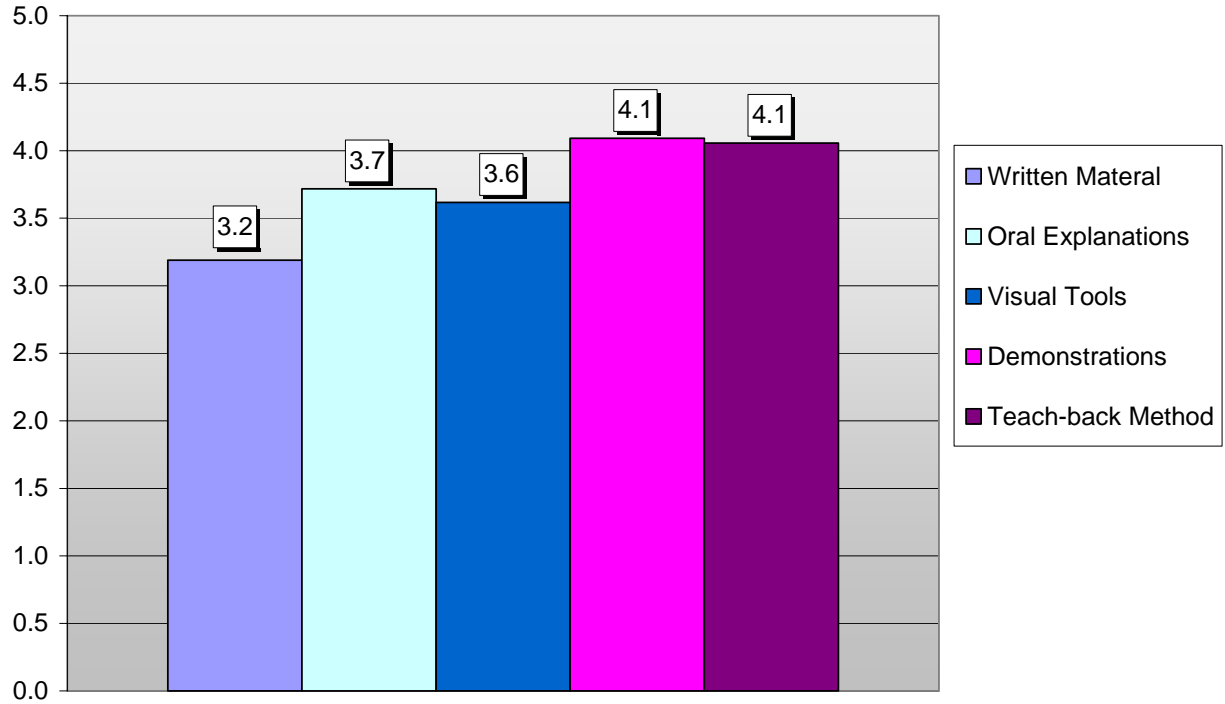


Chart 6
The number of health professionals that use each communication tool

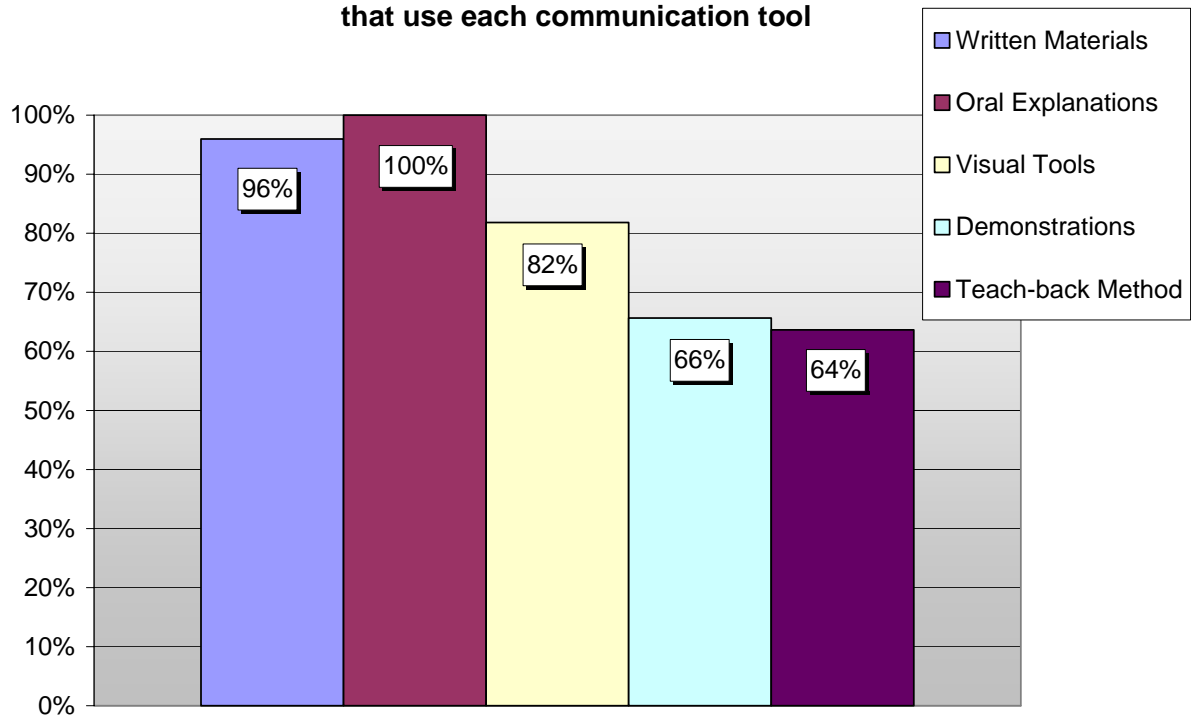


Chart 7

Health professionals who said they had patients who had difficulty understanding health information

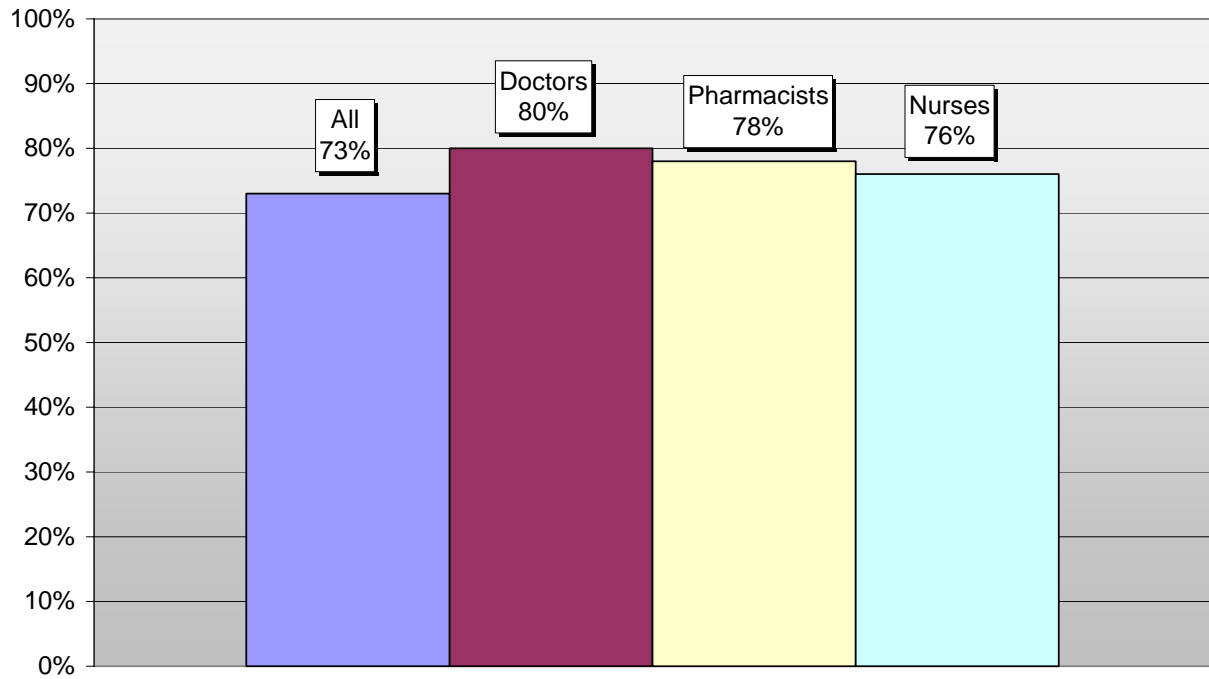


Chart 8

Challenges facing health professionals

