

PLAIN LANGUAGE SUMMARIES

AT RISK: A SOCIO-ECONOMIC ANALYSIS OF HEALTH AND LITERACY AMONG SENIORS

SUMMARY BY T. SCOTT MURRAY

What is this study about?

The heart of this study is an examination of the fact that the socio-economic factors that shape population health also appear to be related to literacy levels and practices as well as to how people acquire information. This, the authors conclude, is especially true for the seniors population.

Chapter 1 reviews the existing literature on the socio-economic factors affecting health and supplements this with the authors own research based on the 1994 Canadian *National Population Health Survey* (NPHS). The authors' findings support the existing literature by confirming the link between health status and two socio-economic variables in particular: income and education. It also suggests that some of the relationships between certain of these factors and health can vary by age group.

The unique situation of seniors, those aged 65 and older, is explored in detail. Chapter 2 examines variations in literacy skills and practices and in patterns of information acquisition among seniors using Canadian data from the International Adult Literacy Survey (IALS) 1994.

There is also a concluding chapter that supports the view that seniors with low literacy skills are more likely to have health problems than are seniors with higher literacy abilities. They call for direct measures of health and health activities in conjunction with literacy measurement and assessment especially for Canada's senior population, and they argue that there is a pressing need to consider literacy as an important policy issue for health promotion.

What are the questions addressed by the study?

The authors argue that while the influence of many socio-economic factors on health is increasingly well documented, much less is known about literacy skills and practices as well as patterns of information acquisition among those in the population with higher health risks. As well, they ask how these relationships vary through different stages of the life cycle.

They also seek to understand why these relationships are important suggesting that low literacy skills and related practices may serve as barriers to the attainment of good health care practices and healthy lifestyle decisions. This leads them to consider why literacy can therefore be considered an important policy issue for health promotion concluding that enhancing literacy can help to achieve health promotion goals. They also suggest that understanding literacy practices and patterns is the first step towards more effectively sending health messages to target populations.

Why is this study important?

Traditionally research on health has been concerned with obvious health variables such as genetics, biomedical factors, lifestyle patterns, risk behaviours and the quality of health care. While the importance of that research is undeniable, it has become increasingly evident that the health of a population is also strongly linked to social and economic variables.

This report examines the literature on factors influencing health such as marital status, age, sex, immigration, home ownership, occupational and labour force status, income and education. While the complex interaction of these factors is not yet fully understood the evidence suggests that the link between these variables and health appears to vary through the life cycle. This review examines a number of these factors as they relate to seniors, in particular the impact of literacy skills on health and the adequacy of the literacy skills of the Canadian seniors population.

What does the study conclude?

This report demonstrates that the socio-economic environment remains an important determinant of health and it explores the effects of literacy skill levels on population health. It found:

- People with lower literacy levels are more likely to be at highest health risk, with an increased effect on senior citizens. This relationship tends to occur for all age groups and both sexes.
- A large number of low-literacy senior citizens, who have a relatively higher health risk, require assistance to complete a number of everyday tasks, such as reading government information and filling out forms. Access to social assistance, health care information and a variety of other health-related programs is directly connected to literacy ability.
- Higher-literacy seniors were more likely to obtain information from a wider selection of sources than their lower-literacy counterparts. While television was a major source of knowledge of current events, those with higher-literacy were more likely than those with lower literacy to use newspapers and magazines as additional sources of information.
- A large number of senior citizens overestimated their literacy abilities. Those with the lowest-measured literacy abilities, whether prose, document or quantitative, were much more likely to have overestimated their literacy abilities than those with higher literacy scores.

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- Possible dangers to the health of these seniors were observed in the large numbers of low literacy seniors who needed to take medicine daily and presumably to read and understand medicine bottle instructions and prescriptions.

The authors conclude that their findings suggest that literacy should be treated as an important policy issue, especially in the field of health promotion, noting that the evidence is indirect for the most part. They call for direct measures of health and health activities in conjunction with literacy measurement and assessment especially for Canada's senior population.

The study's results, supported by both health and literacy research, indicate that many of Canada's senior citizens suffer from poor literacy abilities. The authors conclude that these people may endanger themselves (for example, by misunderstanding instructions on medication or misreading consent forms) and may affect medical expenditures as well (for example, by misusing medical services).

In terms of overall public health, the authors conclude that the medical literature and their findings suggest that low literacy affects people's health activities and lifestyles. They suggest that in each of these domains literacy presents itself as a potentially modifiable health policy area. Given the growing size of Canada's senior population, the forecast of increased use of medications among senior citizens and the tendency of literacy abilities to decline for seniors, they argue that there is a pressing need to consider literacy as an important policy issue for health promotion.

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