

## PREFÁCIO

Health literacy –  
A key to social change for better health and well-being

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*“Health is not everything but without health everything is nothing”*  
Schopenhauer

On top of the art museum AROS in Aarhus, Denmark, where I live, there is a gigantic circle-formed rainbow in which you can walk and look out at the city. The multi-colored glass makes you look at the world around us in a new way. Likewise, with health literacy. When you adopt the concept of health literacy and start applying it as a lens to the work we do within health care, disease prevention and health promotion; it becomes clear that we can do so much more to make people thrive, not only survive. During the COVID-19 pandemic, it was apparent how important health is for everything. The pandemic is threatening people’s lives, their health and well-being but also the societal infra-structure, even in well-functioning welfare societies. We needed to quickly adapt to new knowledge and practices to keep the illness at bay.

Health literacy entails the knowledge, motivation, and competencies to access, understand, appraise, and apply information to form judgement and make decisions concerning health care, disease prevention and health promotion in everyday life to maintain and promote quality of life during the life course, often with support of health providers. Amidst the pandemic, we needed to find new ways of keeping ourselves fit, changing the way we interacted with others in order not to get infected, keeping focus on hygiene and physical distances, following the new research that was shared about the virus and the disease, and yet, being aware of fake news and silo-thinking. At times,

it has been tiresome and lonely to be part of the disruptive new ways of living; yet also a reminder about what really matters, namely the good life with work, family and friends. Even before the pandemic, there were threats to the good life. The burden of non-communicable diseases was growing, the adherence to health education was lacking; and new digital habits hampered physical activity, particularly among children and adolescents.

Importantly, health literacy is developed during the life course. It is influenced by personal, situational, and cultural factors and impacts people's health service use, health status and behaviour, engagement in health as well as enabling equity and sustainability. Research has revealed how people with higher education and higher socio-economic status have better opportunities than others. While much has happened in the past decades and especially in the last ten years in Europe; health literacy is still a neglected public health challenge in many countries. Health literacy is content and context specific and can be measured in many ways. The European Health Literacy Survey from 2021 showed the state of the art related to general health literacy in 17 European countries. It confirms that health literacy leads to increased health status, decreased hospitalization, increased preventive measures, increased quality of care, and increased active participation in health hand well-being. However, health literacy is also influenced by the way health is provided from a societal point of view. Some feel empowered when they interact with health systems; while others feel stupid and stressed. Mostly, health services are not designed to meet people's health literacy needs. Instead, they provide standardized solutions that may benefit some but not all.

Health literacy can be a catalyst of change and act as an accelerator of the sustainable development goals by being recognized and promoted actively by all stakeholders involved in the provision of health. While people can be empowered by strengthening their health literacy to match the complexity of health systems today; it is also necessary to redesign health systems to fully comply to people's needs. Many health systems today are compartmentalized and specialized leaving little

opportunity for holistic and people-centered approaches to treatment and prevention. New thinking is needed to make a better match according to people's needs. It means facilitating a new way of distributing resources where some seemingly receive different levels of services than others to cope and grow.

Health literacy can be improved by designing better visuals, signs, and forms. It can also be promoted through communication in clear language and focus on making patient journeys and access to services smoother and comforting. Lastly, it can be advanced through strategic planning and societal values embracing people-centered care. Health literacy is thus a political choice which requires strong leadership and a focus on what is needed. Examples of health literacy actions include health literacy policy goals, health literacy action plans, health literate organizations, and health literate workforces. Health literacy is a multi-sectoral endeavor that includes e.g., building health literacy in schools, designing new health healthy cities and engaging people as co-creators when it comes to personal health and health of communities.

The capacity building needed to enhance health literacy is immense, however, if we succeed, we will be able to save time, costs, and lives. The health literacy movement is constantly growing engaging champions from many fields and sectors. The International Health Literacy Association welcomes everyone to be part of the vibrant community to enhance local and national efforts. Health literacy champions face the challenge of health literacy gaps and strive to be the change to leave no one behind. Thanks for your commitment!

### **Como citar?**

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