

Educational support materials for ABIM's *Care for the Underserved* Module

Module #16

Many patients are confused by the instructions written on medication labels.(1-4) Patients with limited literacy and those who are on more medications are at greatest risk. (1,2) Limited health literacy is prevalent in the United States.(5,6) The average reading level of the US population is estimated at the eighth grade; over 75 million adults in the 2003 National Assessment of Adult Literacy had "basic" or "below basic" literacy.(5) Limited literacy is more common among those aged 65 and older, those receiving Medicare or Medicaid, those with less than a high school education, among immigrants, and among those with one or more chronic diseases.(3,5,6)

In one study at a county hospital, nearly half of primary care patients misunderstood common dosage instructions on prescription container labels.(1) Although 71 percent of patients with low literacy could correctly read and state the instructions "Take two tablets by mouth twice daily," only 35 percent could demonstrate the correct number of pills to be taken daily.

Citing lack of standards for dispensed prescription containers as a root cause for medication errors , the Institute of Medicine requested an advisory panel publish guidelines for universal standards for prescription container labeling.(7) The guidelines suggest that label instructions use precise and simple wording, avoid jargon, and include purpose of the medication, e.g. "for high blood pressure." Patients are also significantly more likely to understand instructions that include explicit time periods or precise times of day as compared to number of times per day. Hence it is preferable to instruct a patient to "Use two pills in the morning and two pills in the evening," than to advise, " use two pills twice a day"(8)

The use of simple, clear language, and checking whether a patient has understood medication instructions through the "teach back" technique (i.e. asking patients to repeat in their own words or demonstrate how they will use a medication) can help reduce medication error and improve adherence.(9-12).

For further information, see the following:

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