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## PLAIN LANGUAGE

BUSINESS CASE BRIEF

CREATED BY: MINNESOTA HEALTH LITERACY PARTNERSHIP

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### MAKING THE BUSINESS CASE

Today, the United States health care system represents over 17.5% of the Gross Domestic Product and spending over \$230 billion annually, making health care an unparalleled economic force.<sup>1</sup> As a result, health care systems are the greatest opportunity investment in community health. Low health literacy is a major source of inefficiency in the U.S. health care system.

**The estimated cost of low health literacy to the U.S. economy ranges from \$106 billion to \$238 billion annually.**<sup>2</sup> This represents between 7 percent and 17 percent of all personal health care expenditures.<sup>2</sup>

- Patients with low health literacy have an average health care cost of \$13,000 compared to only \$3,000 for those with higher literacy levels.<sup>3</sup>
- Inpatient spending for a patient with inadequate health literacy was \$993 higher than that of a patient with adequate reading skills.<sup>4</sup>

### WHAT IS HEALTH LITERACY?

Health literacy represents the skills necessary for an individual to participate in the health care system and maintain good health.<sup>5</sup> Low health literacy is a universal problem. Nearly 9 out of 10 Americans have difficulty using the everyday health information that is routinely available.<sup>6</sup>

At the Minnesota Health Literacy Partnership, we define health literacy as:  
*A **patient's ability** to obtain, understand and act on health information, and the **capacity of health care providers and health care systems** to communicate clearly, educate about health and empower patients.*<sup>7</sup>

This means that a health-literate individual is one who can access and use health information effectively, and that a health-literate provider is one who can deliver health information to patients effectively.<sup>7</sup>  
**Plain language is one of the best tools to help improve health literacy.**

### WHAT IS PLAIN LANGUAGE?

Obtaining health care hinges on having the necessary skills to read, fill out and understand medical and health insurance forms. Consumers also need to communicate with health care professionals and follow basic instructions and medical advice. However, health systems, professionals and insurance plans often present information or resources in ways that are difficult for most people to understand. Resources provided on the internet or by health systems are dense, technical and use jargon-filled language. As a result, the health care system itself can pose a serious barrier to appropriate care.

However, a simple and effective technique to address these barriers is using plain language. Plain language is a health literacy tool that allows people to find what they need, understand what they find, and act appropriately on that understanding after the first time they hear or read it.<sup>8</sup>

Plain language is...	Plain language is NOT...
a tool to improve health literacy	“dumbing down”
simple, clear, concise	removing important or needed information
understood the first time	imprecise
everyday words	easy to do

Using plain language means health care systems and staff eliminate jargon words and replace them with common words, speak in an active voice, use short sentences, and organize points logically to ensure better understanding.

### WHY USE PLAIN LANGUAGE?

Using plain language supports the following:

- Plain Writing Act of 2010 requiring federal agencies to use “clear Government communication that the public can understand and use.”<sup>9</sup>
- Governor Dayton’s 2014 executive order<sup>10</sup> on plain language requiring all state agencies to “use commonly used language, write in clear and concise sentences, and reduce the use of jargon and acronyms that make state government nearly impossible to understand.”<sup>11</sup>
- Key priorities of the **Minnesota Action Plan to Improve Health Literacy** [released March 2016].

But it also...

- Leads to better health
- Makes your message stand out
- Improves communication
- Shows patient focus
- Eliminates barriers
- Improves patient safety
- Reduces time spent explaining
- Improves compliance<sup>12, 13</sup>

Patients have the right to understand health care information that is necessary for them to safely care for themselves, and to choose among available alternatives.<sup>14</sup> Health care professionals have a duty to provide information in simple, clear and plain language, and to check that patients have understood the information before ending the conversation.<sup>15</sup>

## CONSEQUENCES OF NOT USING PLAIN LANGUAGE

By now, it is probably clear to you how important using plain language to communicate about health and insurance is. It helps consumers be engaged and achieve their maximum health potential. But just in case you still need convincing, here are some of the consequences of NOT using plain language:

- Poor health outcomes
- Greater health care costs
- Consumer misunderstanding
- Less adherence to treatment plans and how to take medicine
- Trouble accessing and using health care services and insurance benefits
- Frustration when interacting with health and insurance professionals
- Difficulty managing chronic conditions and health
- Unnecessary support calls caused by unclear instructions
- Badly filled out or incomplete forms and applications
- Health messages that fail to motivate and engage consumers in healthy behaviors and preventive care
- Unclear memos and letters that require endless clarification
- Litigation<sup>3,16</sup>

## FINANCIAL IMPACT OF USING PLAIN LANGUAGE

Using plain language can result in major savings, as well as better health. According to recent Census Bureau findings, the savings that can be achieved by improving health literacy [with plain language] translate into enough funds to insure every one of the more than 47 million persons who lacked coverage in the United States in 2006.<sup>2</sup>

- Los Angeles County revised documents and phone messages and conducted training on clear communication
  - ➡ 30% reduction in customer assistance calls<sup>17</sup>
- Cleveland Clinic revised billing statements back in the 90s
  - ➡ 80% increase in patient payments because they knew where to pay, how to pay, when to pay, etc.<sup>17</sup>
- Veteran's Benefits Administration revised beneficiary letter
  - ➡ saved \$4,430,000 by improving response rate from 43% to 65%<sup>17</sup>

Furthermore, by using plain language, healthcare systems can relieve the growing economic burden for future generations.

***Our responsibility as a health care community is to communicate clearly. Without clear communication, we cannot expect people to adopt health behaviors, follow medical advice, or understand their health insurance plans. When people receive accurate, easy-to-understand information about a health issue, they are better able to take action to protect and improve their health and wellness.***<sup>18</sup>

*Minnesota Action Plan to Improve Health Literacy*

## SOURCES

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To learn more about health literacy and plain language, visit the Minnesota Health Literacy Partnership website at <http://healthliteracymn.org/>

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