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# When Patients Just Don't Understand

## Health Care Industry Responds to Extra \$73 Billion Spent Annually

WASHINGTON, Jan. 3 /PRNewswire/ -- This year, the U.S. health care system will unnecessarily spend about \$73 billion -- in extra doctor visits, hospitalizations, or longer hospital stays -- because patients just didn't understand what their doctor said or how to take their medication appropriately.

This phenomenon, known as "low health literacy," is when patients cannot understand, interpret, and/or act on basic health information, such as instructions on prescriptions, appointment slips, informed consent documents, insurance forms, and/or other health educational materials.

With more than 90 million Americans or 46 percent of the adult population today considered functionally illiterate, low health literacy is becoming a dangerous and alarming public health issue. It is estimated that one of three seniors does not have the health literacy skills needed to understand instructions for prescriptions, medical forms and doctors' directions on self-care. Research also indicates that patients with low health literacy are also more likely to suffer from poor health status and/or from adverse effects from serious medical errors if they do not properly understand their illness or treatment.

One of the first major nationwide programs to address these issues is currently under development by the American Medical Association Foundation, the philanthropic arm of the AMA. "We want to continue to improve patient-physician communications, and to enable us to work in partnership with patients to diminish the affects of low health literacy," said Herman I. Abromowitz, MD, AMA Foundation President, who is working with a team of experts to develop strategies to address this problem.

"Although some pioneering work has been done, we believe that work is still needed before the total extent of this problem is fully recognized and solutions implemented. The AMA Foundation is proud to be at the forefront of this effort because we believe that by increasing health literacy we can significantly improve the quality of health care in America."

While leading health care groups and trade associations continue to hope for federal funding to research and understand the problem, develop demonstration programs for Medicare and Medicaid, and create other national programs on health literacy, there are several things patients can do to help themselves.

The following tips offered by a leading health literacy expert, Ruth Parker, M.D., Emory University, Associate Professor of Medicine, may help patients better understand the health care information they receive:

- \* If you have difficulty understanding what your doctor says or are confused, bring a friend or family member to your appointment,
- \* Try to identify important questions about your condition/disease/illness/treatment and discuss them during your doctor's visit,
- \* When you are given instructions for self-care of medical problems, review them with the doctor to be sure you correctly understand what you need to know to take care of yourself,
- \* Find out who you should call if you have questions later on,
- \* Ask your doctor to explain information to you in language you understand,
- \* Take along all your medications to each doctor visit so he/she can see what you are currently taking,
- \* Do not be afraid to ask for help. Health care professionals are there to help you. You are not alone. Many patients have problems with health literacy.

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