

Patient Education: The Creation of Patient Enablers



BY Heather L. Orsted

The primary mission of a patient enabler, such as a patient handout, should be to impart useful, “actionable” information, to enable best practice to occur.¹ Handouts should focus on your patient’s needs and concerns while providing information that you think your patient will need to know.² Some patient handouts are read with interest while others are opened, scanned and dismissed. If a brochure’s first impression does not create interest for the reader, the odds are that it will never be read.¹

A key step to writing a good brochure or enabler is remembering your target audience. As a health-care professional you may be interested in the technical aspects of your patient’s disease, but most patients won’t care and will be bogged down by the medical jargon. They want basic information that will improve their quality of their life while living with a health-related disorder (such as diabetes). So, when creating your enabler, limit your content to what matters to the average patient, use the “KIS” principle (Keep it Simple), and try writing the enabler so your family will understand the information you are sharing.¹

Handout text can be made more readable through the use of short words, short sentences, and short paragraphs. Low socioeconomic status, minimal education, and English as a second language correlate with reading difficulties, yet many people with reading difficulties have no outward signs of their disability.³ According to recent Statistics Canada data, 48 per cent of Canadian adults have low literacy, leading to difficulty in interpreting written communication in everyday life.⁴ An appropriate reading level, therefore, can make or break your handout. Patient education material

should aim for a reading level at the fifth or sixth grade [Editor’s note: For your interest the article you are reading now is at a grade 10 level]. If you are writing for the elderly or visually impaired (such as persons with retinopathy), use a larger type size—at least a 12-point font—and avoid using capital letters, which are harder to read.²

Keep the topic of the handout narrow; for example, a brochure on diabetes may be too long or too general to hold the interest of the reader, but a brochure on why people with diabetes should check their sensation is much more likely to be useful. Remember, 80 per cent of any handout should be directly relevant to the recipient.

It is true that a picture is worth a thousand words, so be creative when creating enablers. Insert visuals such as a good drawing or a photograph. The right visual can be more effective than paragraphs of text and will help overcome language and reading-level barriers.¹

Effectively supporting a change in behaviour involves several approaches. Well-written, appropriately designed educational material for patients is only one strategy in a host of strategies to support change.³ It is, however, a great first step! ☺

References

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