

Briefly Noted:

Selected Canadian projects and reports on health and literacy, literacy and health

by **Maria Moriarty**

In Canada there is a significant and growing body of literature about literacy and health.

Throughout, it includes oft-cited figures about the numbers of people in Canada who cannot read and understand labels on medicine bottles or follow medical instructions, and similar figures to indicate the costs to the health care system apparently attributable to people with limited literacy skills. The literature establishes literacy as a significant factor in health and often highlights the importance of plain language in health communication. However, poverty and low income have been identified as the primary determinants of health in Canada. In light of this, perhaps explorations of literacy and health issues should consider the connections between not knowing and not having. Perhaps we should also reconsider the status quo in relation to health and public policy and the general discourse about health, healthiness and well-being in Canada.

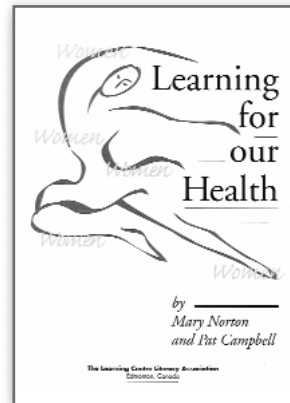
The following are selected projects and reports on health and literacy and literacy-and-health from across the country.

How does Literacy Affect the Health of Canadians? A Profile Paper by Burt Perrin. Minister of Public Works and Government Services Canada. 1998. Available online at www.hc-sc.gc.ca/hppb/phdd/literacy/literacy.html

This paper, released in 1998, discusses literacy in relation to health. It considers the mechanisms by which literacy affects health and provides some ideas on how the health field can begin to address the connections between literacy and health.

Learning for our Health. The Learning Centre Literacy Association. Edmonton, Alberta. 1998.

Learning for our Health: Outcomes for women in a participatory literacy and health education program.



Women Getting Together.

by Mary Norton and Pat Campbell The Learning Centre Literacy Association. Edmonton, Alberta. 1998 and 1999.

These three books document the work of a group of women who shared learnings and

questions about health at The Learning Centre in Edmonton. The program, developed by Mary Norton and Pat Campbell, used a participatory education approach. *Learning for our Health* is based on the program and is intended for facilitators of literacy programs, health centres and community organizations. The book offers a thoughtful and thought-provoking discussion of issues relating to literacy and health, opening up the question of income, not lifestyle or literacy, as the primary determinant of health in Canada. The book also considers how participatory education can extend understandings of inequity and power relations.

In *Women Getting Together*, women who attended the program describe their work and learning.

Results of a 1999 evaluation of the project are included in *Learning for our Health: Outcomes for women in a participatory literacy and health education program*.

Now I know. Shelburne County Learning Network. Shelburne, Nova Scotia. 1999.

Now I Know is a compilation of stories written by adults in upgrading programs throughout western Nova Scotia. The stories tell of learners' experiences with health and health-related issues. The binder includes a set of articles covering common health concerns, like colds and allergic reactions. Each story or article is accompanied by a set of exercises, comprehension questions and an answer key. Created as a learning resource for levels one and two of the Learning Nova Scotia curriculum, *Now I Know* could be used within a literacy program to provoke discussion of health issues or to work on the language of health.



Literacy and Health Promotion: Four Case Studies. Heart Health. Nova Scotia. 2001.

This report describes a 1999-2000 project in Nova Scotia that examined the connection between levels of literacy and being able to engage in health promotion. The project was carried out over thirty-six weeks and attempted to develop a "baseline capacity profile." In the project, four adult literacy learners and tutors worked together to research health topics, including Parkinson's disease, alcoholism and diabetes. At the same time, they worked on specific literacy skills. This report includes details about what each team did and includes sample materials created by the teams, lessons plans, and suggested activities relating to adult literacy and health promotion.

Literacy and Health: Defining Links and Developing Partnerships.

**by Charles Moody and Marg Rose
Literacy Partners of Manitoba. Winnipeg,
Manitoba. 2004. Available online at
www.health.mb.literacy.ca (click on Final Report).**

The aim of this project was to help health care providers find ways to remove barriers for clients with limited literacy skills. The report includes information about workshops on literacy that the authors delivered to health care workers in Manitoba, and information about clear language and communication issues for the health care profession. It also includes the results of a survey that asked health care providers and literacy workers about health and literacy.

**Taking Off the Blindfold: Seeing How Literacy Affects Health. by Doris Gillis and Allan Quigley
St. Francis Xavier University. Antigonish,
Nova Scotia. 2004. Available online at
www.nald.ca/healthliteracystfx.**

This report outlines findings of a project based in three rural counties in Nova Scotia. The project explored the links between limited literacy skills and health. The report features the voices of participants sharing their experiences of how literacy influences their health. It is intended as a basis for examining and improving policies and programs to enhance the health of adults with limited literacy in rural Nova Scotia.

**Centre for Literacy of Quebec
Health Literacy Project Reports 2001-2003.
Available online at www.nald.ca/litcent.htm
(click on Publications).**

The Health Literacy Project is a joint initiative of The Centre for Literacy of Quebec and the Department of Nursing at McGill University Health Centre (MUHC) in Montreal, Quebec. The project began in 1999-2000 and was conducted in three phases. Phase One produced a comprehensive *Background Document on Literacy and Health* (2001) and a *Report on the Needs Assessment at the Montreal General Hospital*. Phase Two focused on finding ways to address the issues and needs identified in Phase One and produced a paper entitled *More than Plain Language: Adapting Health Communication for Hard-to-Reach Patients* (2002). In Phase Three, the medical and education literature was reviewed to examine alternative methods of health communication such as plain language, audiotapes, videotapes, interactive media and visuals. The first of a planned series of Research Briefs on Health Communication, *Plain Language and Patient Education: A Summary of Current Research*, was published in 2003.

The Health Literacy Project is a groundbreaking project, providing a carefully researched set of documents that critically examine concepts such as the *hard-to-reach* patient and the thorny issue of compliance. The project questions accepted wisdom that focuses the connection between health and literacy narrowly on plain language and seeks to extend the understandings of issues related to literacy and health as complex. The reports of this important project are essential reading for anyone working in the area of literacy and health.

Several recent studies in Canada have examined the impact of poverty on health.

A significant amount of work has been done by the Canadian Population Health Initiative, which works with researchers and policy-makers to increase understanding about the determinants of health. Their 2004 report, *Improving the Health of Canadians*, examines how income and health are linked. It looks at the latest research on what factors influence the health of Canadians and at the impacts of public policy on health.

Several Canadian Population Health Initiative research reports focusing on the impacts of poverty on health are available at <http://secure.cihi.ca/cihiweb>.

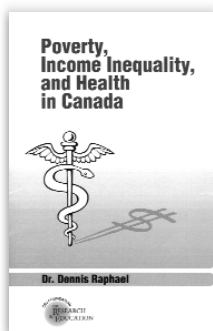
For a useful introduction to the Population Health Approach and a very clear description of the Key Determinants of Health in Canada, go to www.hc-sc.gc.ca/hppb/phdd/approach/index.html.

Poverty, Income Inequality, and Health in Canada
by Dennis Raphael

Toronto. Centre for Social Justice Foundation for Research and Education. 2001.

Available online at www.socialjustice.org/pdfs/PovertyIncomeHealth.pdf.

This report cites a substantial body of research in the United Kingdom and Canada that clearly establishes poverty and income inequality as primary determinants of health. Raphael, of the School of Health Policy and Management at York University in Toronto, offers a compelling argument: public policies that entrench the inequitable distribution of wealth have direct and incontrovertible negative effects on the health of poor people and the general population. This paper calls into question facile connections between literacy and health that encourage stereotyping individuals with literacy challenges as incapable people who make irresponsible lifestyle choices and burden the health care system.

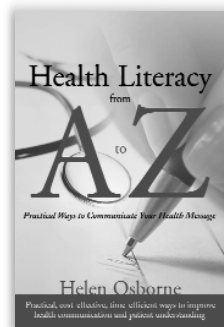


For a Canadian perspective on health literacy, visit the Canadian Health Network web site (www.canadian-health-network.ca). It includes an article by Doris Gillis, "Beyond Words: The Health Literacy Connection," which addresses issues of access to services and the ability to advocate for one's own health.

Health Literacy from A to Z: Practical Ways to Communicate Your Health Message

by Helen Osborne

Sudbury, MA. Jones & Bartlett. 2004.



Health Literacy from A to Z is the latest in a series of publications by Helen Osborne, a committed advocate for improved health communication. She is the founder and director of Health Literacy Consulting and Health Literacy Month and devotes her efforts to raising awareness worldwide about the

importance of understandable health information. This latest publication is a practical handbook intended for health care providers but will also serve as a very useful general introduction to the issue. Osborne defines health literacy as "a shared responsibility in which patients and providers each must communicate in ways that the other can understand" (p. 2). The implications of this understanding of health literacy are that health literacy is a process of communication between provider and patient—not a simple need for plain language materials.

For more information about Health Literacy Month, go to www.healthliteracymonth.org.

Prescribing Learning. A guide to good practice in learning and health by Kathryn James.

London. NIACE. 2001

Despite the witty title, this book is exploratory rather than prescriptive. It offers a discussion of the impact of learning on general health and was written for practitioners and policy-makers who work in health improvement and adult learning, including basic skills programming, in the United Kingdom. *Prescribing Learning* reviews policy themes that connect widening participation in learning to improvements in health, and it profiles a variety of examples of innovative on-the-ground work in the United Kingdom that link learning and health improvement, including some innovative projects in the area of Arts and Health. The book also includes a discussion of strategies and approaches that contribute to good practice in this area. *Prescribing Learning* provides a refreshing perspective on the benefits of learning in its broadest sense, as a means to address critical issues such as social exclusion, and as a means to generally contribute to improving health. ■