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Improving health literacy is a job for the the whole community

Dr. don hayes jr.
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An estimated 90 million Americans have low "health literacy" — the ability to read and understand health information.

Low health literacy has a high cost, resulting in anywhere from \$106 billion to \$238 billion in added health care costs annually.

A human cost is involved, too, since those with low health literacy are most likely to have poor medical outcomes.

Last week, government and health care leaders from across the state gathered for Kentucky's first health literacy summit.

Health literacy, as defined by the Institute of Medicine, is the ability to obtain, process and understand basic health information and services needed to make appropriate health decisions. For instance, parents need to be able to read, understand and use health care information to make decisions and follow instructions for treatment of a sick or injured child.

Health professionals often provide useful information and treatment plans for a sick child. However, parents actually perform the care and give the treatment. Improving health literacy is probably the single-most important thing parents can do for the health of their children. Understanding what the illness is, and knowing what should happen and what to do when things go wrong, are extremely important.

We must work as a community to improve the health literacy rate in Kentucky.

Even as a physician, I am not fully literate regarding diseases that I do not commonly treat, because I practice in a sub-specialty. In order to improve my own understanding, I often have to read about other diseases related to illnesses and disorders that I do not come into contact with frequently.

Patients and caretakers can improve their own health literacy by asking their health care providers open-ended questions that allow them to go into greater detail. Once information and instructions have been given, restate all the information in your own words to make sure you understand. If you do not understand what the physician or health care provider is saying or need further instructions, ask for more details in simpler language that you understand.

Dr. Don Hayes Jr. is an assistant professor of pediatrics and internal medicine at the University of Kentucky College of Medicine and a pulmonologist for UK HealthCare.

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