

MONTH

Seminar fosters 'health literacy'

Dismal Kentucky record targeted

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Speaker Janet Ohene-Frempong says health literacy problems are widespread, even for those who read well.

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Millions of Americans have trouble reading, understanding and acting upon medical information — and this “marginal health literacy” is a big roadblock in Kentucky, one of the least healthy states in America.

That was one message shared by speakers at Kentucky's first health literacy summit, sponsored by the University of Kentucky and Humana and held at the Seelbach Hilton on Friday. The invitation-only event drew about 150 people, including educators, insurance officials, doctors and nurses. One goal was to develop a coalition to address Kentucky's health literacy problems.

“If we're not healthy, we don't have a sense of well-being no matter what else we do,” said Michael B. McCallister, president and chief executive officer of Humana Inc. “... Thirty million people have below basic health literacy. The result is higher costs and poor outcomes.”

In addition to some of the highest rates of cancer, cardiovascular disease, diabetes, obesity and smoking, Kentucky also has lower levels of education than many other states. From 2001 to 2005, 74.1 percent of Kentucky adults had at least a high school diploma, compared with 80.4 nationally. In a few of Kentucky's area development districts, fewer than six in 10 adults had at least a high school education.

Keynote speaker Janet Ohene-Frempong, a national health literacy expert and president of Jo Frempong & Associates, said 42 percent of Kentucky adults read at the two lowest levels of literacy.

But she said health literacy problems don't affect only those who have trouble read-

ing. She and McCallister pointed out that many people walk out of doctor's offices without a crystal-clear idea of the doctor's instructions, make mistakes when taking medicines or stumble through incomprehensible insurance documents. Ohene-Frempong said the health care system has grown increasingly complex, becoming “a cauldron of confusion” for many.

She added that those with the lowest levels of health literacy fit no racial, ethnic or geographic stereotype and can't be spotted based on appearance. “People are not wearing a sign saying: ‘I don't understand, I can't read’ and so forth,” she said.

Ohene-Frempong showed a video that gave examples of people struggling with health literacy, including an elderly woman who gave the wrong name of the medication she was taking and a man who didn't know that hypertension was another word for the high blood pressure he had. One woman spoke of a cascade of misunderstandings — complicated by reading difficulties — that led her to get a hysterectomy without knowing what procedure she was getting until after it was done.

UK President Lee Todd Jr. called Kentucky's poor health statistics the “Kentucky uglies.” “How can we get people to have half the passion they have for athletics for changing some of those statistics?” he asked.

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