Practice
Speaking and Writing in Plain Language

Sabrina Kurtz-Rossi, M.Ed.
Director, Health Literacy Leadership Institute
Tufts University School of Medicine
To screen or not to screen, that is the question.
Measuring Health Literacy

• Test of Functional Health Literacy in Adults (TOFHLA)

• Rapid Estimate of Adult Literacy in Medicine (REALM)

• The Newest Vital Signs

Screening Questions for Limited Health Literacy (Chew 2008)

• How often do you have someone help you read hospital materials?

• How confident are you filling out medical forms by yourself?

• How often do you have problems learning about your medicine condition because of difficulty understanding written information?

Single Item Literacy Screener (SILS)

“How often do you need to have someone help you read written material from your doctor or pharmacy?

To screen or not to screen, that is the question?

- **Pros:** Identifying individual as risk, documenting in the records, offering tailored intervention

- **Cons:** Promotes anxiety and shame, not a universal precautions approach, creates additional barrier
PRACTICE
Teach back technique
What is Teach Back?

- An evidence-based intervention that improves health outcomes
- A way to make sure you explain information clearly
- A way to check understanding and if needed re-teach or identify additional support

Teach Back Example
Teach Back Example

• What will you tell your husband about the changes we made to your blood pressure medicine today?

• We’ve gone over a lot of information about how to get more exercise in your day. How will you make it work at home?
Use Open Ended Questions

- **Closed:** Do you have a follow up appointment? Do you have any questions?
- **Open:** When is your follow up appointment? What questions do you have?
Working with Interpreters

- Clarify interpreter’s role
- Note mode of interpretation
- Work with a trained interpreter
- Practice Triadic Interview
- Use first-person
- Maintain transparency

http://www.hrsa.gov/healthliteracy/training.htm

Everything gets interpreted
Teach Back Tool Kit

http://www.teachbacktraining.org/
Elements of Competency

1. Caring tone of voice
2. Comfortable body language / eye contact
3. Plain language, avoid jargon
4. Patient explains back using their own words
5. Non-shaming questions / environment
6. Ask open-ended questions
7. Responsibility is on provider
8. Explain again and re-check
9. Reader-friendly materials to support learning
10. Document use and response
Activity
Teach back practice

Read case example. Work in pairs.
Practice speaking in plain language.
Practice teach back. Receive feedback.
Switch roles.
PRACTICE
Writing in plain language
Passive Voice

• For good protection, sun screen must be applied every few hours.

• Fish high in mercury should not be eaten by pregnant or nursing women.

• Chronic disease can be managed by patients in partnership with their doctors.
Abstract and Vague

• It’s important to discuss general health and lifestyle information with your doctor.

• Adults need adequate sleep to function effectively in their jobs.

• Patient vital signs will be taken at every visit.

• Good oral health is important to teeth and gums.
Too Many Words

• The majority of patients don’t understand preparatory instructions for most but not all laboratory procedures.

• The important thing is that the health care team will carefully monitor your progress at each and every visit.
Activity
Plain language practice

Review case example. Identify three most important points. Use active voice. Be specific. Use common words. Rewrite as simply as possible.
Key Points

• Screening tools are available but no consensus on utility
• Teaching back is an evidence-based intervention
• Open ended questions are key to effective teach back
• Plain language writing takes practice