

Closing and Action Steps

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Acting Surgeon General Moritsugu closed the workshop with his impressions of the day's presentations and discussion. He stated that the scientific evidence presented at the workshop indicates a need for health literacy improvement. RADM Moritsugu highlighted a number of themes he heard over the course of the workshop:

- First, that we must provide clear, understandable, science-based health information to the American people. In the absence of clear communication and access, we cannot expect people to adopt the health behaviors we champion.
- Second, the promises of medical research, health information technology, and advances in healthcare delivery cannot be realized if we do not simultaneously address health literacy.
- Third, we need to look at health literacy in the context of large systems—social systems, cultural systems, education systems, and the public health system. Limited health literacy is not an individual deficit but a systematic problem that should be addressed by ensuring that healthcare and health information systems are aligned with the needs of the public and with healthcare providers.
- Lastly, more research is needed. But there is already enough good information that we can use to make practical improvements in health literacy.

RADM Moritsugu reiterated the need to engage the public in health literacy improvement, stimulate change in the nation's health care system, and motivate health professionals to educate themselves about the health literacy problems in this country and what can be done to improve our communication with the public. He noted that many key stakeholders were in the room, such as the Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services and other agencies in DHHS, as well as the AMA, JCAHO, and others. Working together, these organizations can change the healthcare system, from reimbursement to communication practices, to improve health literacy. The problems that are associated with limited health literacy are complex and far-reaching. A simple one-size-fits-all solution will not work.

The next steps for the Office of the Surgeon General will be the issuance of proceedings from the Workshop. Based on the evidence presented at the Workshop, a Surgeon General's Call to Action may be an appropriate next step. RADM Moritsugu remarked that the Workshop and proceedings represent the beginning of a long-term strategy to improve health literacy. Part of this strategy is to make linkages to other high priority public health topics such as patient safety.

RADM Moritsugu closed the Workshop by thanking the participants for their contribution and commitment, and for bringing an oft-overlooked issue to the forefront of public health practice and policy.