

Charge and Goals

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RADM Moritsugu emphasized the important role health literacy plays in efforts to improve the public's health. When people have accurate, understandable information about a public health issue, they are better able to take action to maintain or improve their health. The Office of the Surgeon General focuses on three major health priorities: prevention, public health preparedness, and eliminating health disparities. Health literacy is a critical underpinning to each of these priorities.

Definition of Health Literacy

RADM Moritsugu began with the definition of health literacy first developed in the National Library of Medicine bibliography on health literacy and adopted by *Healthy People 2010* and the Institute of Medicine (IOM). Health literacy is the degree to which individuals have the capacity to obtain, process, and understand basic health information and services needed to make appropriate health decisions. The 2004 IOM report, *Health Literacy: A Prescription to End Confusion*, builds on this definition and conceptualizes health literacy as a shared function of cultural, social, and individual factors. According to the report, both the causes and remedies of limited health literacy rest with our cultural and social frameworks, the health and education systems that serve them, and the interactions between these factors and individuals.

Limited Health Literacy: A Public Health Problem

Health literacy is the degree to which individuals have the capacity to obtain, process, and understand basic health information and services needed to make appropriate health decisions.

Healthy People 2010

The Acting Surgeon General encouraged those in attendance to challenge their assumptions about health literacy research and practice. He urged participants to look at health literacy from every angle—from the perspectives of health professionals and those they serve. People of all ages, races, incomes, and education levels are affected by limited health literacy. Even the seemingly simple things that we can all do to stay healthy and safe, such as getting recommended screenings and eating healthy foods, can be difficult for some people. The reality is that to be able to make healthy choices, people must have a basic understanding of how to find and use health information. And they must also understand why these choices are important.

Several recent events have drawn attention to the challenge of limited health literacy. In early 2000, *Healthy People 2010* identified limited health literacy as a public health problem and set national objectives for its improvement. In 2004, the IOM released its health literacy report, finding that nearly one-half of American adults may lack the

needed literacy skills to use the U.S. health care system. At the same time, the Agency for Health Care Research and Quality (AHRQ) released its evidence report on literacy and health outcomes (Berkman, et al., 2004). This report was the result of a thorough scientific review of the evidence related to the effect of low literacy on a wide variety of health outcomes.

A Public Health Approach to Health Literacy Improvement

RADM Moritsugu emphasized the importance of taking a public health approach to health literacy improvement. He noted that over the past 100 years, thanks largely to public health efforts, we have successfully prevented the spread of infectious diseases, increased the life expectancy of Americans, protected against environmental hazards, and reduced accidents and injuries. As threats to America's health shift, so too do our public health efforts. The public health approach allows us to address new challenges such as limited health literacy by defining the problem; identifying its causes and protective factors; developing and testing intervention strategies; implementing interventions; and evaluating and refining those interventions.

Goals for the Workshop

RADM Moritsugu presented the three major goals for the workshop:

- Identify the latest scientific data on the scope and public health consequences of limited health literacy.
- Review and discuss the research needs and identify areas where information is lacking.
- Based on the body of health literacy research, establish an evidence base for taking steps to improve health literacy.

The purpose of the meeting is to present a critical analysis and understanding of the state of the science in the field of health literacy. He emphasized that this workshop is not the end point, but rather, the beginning of a series of activities that the Office of the Surgeon General is undertaking to move this issue forward.