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公立大学法人福島県立医科大学放射線医学県民健康管理センター
国際シンポジウム事務局（広報・国際連携室）
 kenkani@fmu.ac.jp Tel: 024-581-5454 (平日9～17時)
2023 Fukushima Medical University International Symposium on the Fukushima Health Management Survey
Secretariat of International Symposium
Office of Public Communications and International Cooperation, Radiation Medical Science Center for the Fukushima Health Management Survey, Fukushima Medical University
 kenkani@fmu.ac.jp, TEL: +81-24-581-5454 (Weekday, 9 a.m. - 5 p.m. JST)
Dr. Rima E. Rudd
Senior Lecturer on Health Literacy, Education, and Policy
Emerita
Department of Social & Behavioral Sciences
Harvard T.H. Chan School of Public Health
In these fraught times, health messages have been challenged, trust has diminished, and the health and well-being of communities have been profoundly affected.

Health Literacy: Increasing Access to Information, Care and Services

Attention to health literacy can contribute to ongoing efforts to increase access to information, services, and care and thereby reduce disparities. Health literacy action contributes to social justice.
Please note that I will move very quickly over the literacy and numeracy background [slides 6 to 13] to focus on an action plan for **health literacy**.
- You will have access to all of my slides.
- I encourage you to examine the PIAAC survey results for all countries and those related only to Japan.

Literacy

Literacy is a Right

The word is not the privilege of some few men but the right of every man [sic]

Paulo Freire

Literacy is a fundamental human right and the foundation for lifelong learning.

It is fully essential to social and human development in its ability to transform lives.

UNESCO

Literacy is a Social Good

- Social mobility
- Contribution to society
- Civic engagement
- Foundation of a free and democratic society

Dr. Rudd
Adult Literacy Surveys

Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development [OECD]

Waves of assessments
- IALS 1990s,
- ALLS 2003,
- PIAAC 2011-2017, 2018-2024

- **Focus**: Literacy, numeracy, problem solving skills of adults in industrialized nations
- **Measures**: Adults ability to use everyday materials to accomplish everyday tasks with accuracy and consistency
Words & Numbers Get in the Way

Significant numbers of adults in most industrialized nations have difficulty using materials found in everyday life in order to accomplish everyday tasks.

These adults are limited in their ability to participate in economic & civic life.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Country</th>
<th>Score</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Australia</td>
<td>280.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Austria</td>
<td>269.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Canada</td>
<td>273.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Czech Republic</td>
<td>274.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Denmark</td>
<td>270.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>England (UK)</td>
<td>272.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Estonia</td>
<td>275.9</td>
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<tr>
<td>Finland</td>
<td>287.5</td>
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<tr>
<td>France</td>
<td>262.1</td>
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<tr>
<td>Germany</td>
<td>269.8</td>
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<tr>
<td>Ireland</td>
<td>266.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Italy</td>
<td>250.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Japan</td>
<td>296.2</td>
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<tr>
<td>Korea</td>
<td>272.6</td>
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<tr>
<td>Netherlands</td>
<td>284.0</td>
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<tr>
<td>Norway</td>
<td>278.4</td>
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<tr>
<td>Poland</td>
<td>266.9</td>
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<td>Slovak Republic</td>
<td>273.8</td>
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<tr>
<td>Spain</td>
<td>251.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sweden</td>
<td>279.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>United States</td>
<td>269.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Average</td>
<td>272.8</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
2012 PIAAC: % of Adults with Literacy Proficiency

Figure 2.2
Percentage of adults (16-65) at Levels 3-4-5 of literacy proficiency

Japan, Finland, Netherlands, Sweden, Australia, Norway, Estonia, Slovak Republic, Flanders (Belgium), Canada, Average, Czech Republic, Denmark, Korea, England, Germany, United States, Austria, Poland, Ireland, Northern Ireland, France, Cyprus, Spain, Italy
Japan’s Scoring is Above OECD Average

Proficiency

- The proficiency in literacy and numeracy is above OECD average for all age groups. Proficiency in numeracy is maintained over the long term.
- The proficiency in problem-solving in technology-rich environments is above OECD average for most of the age groups.
- While average proficiency levels are quite high, segments of the population have problematic skills.

Dr. Rudd
Across all Countries
Who Has Limited Literacy Skills?

• Members of marginalized population groups
  • Members of minority population groups
  • Immigrants
• People with limited resources and/or living in poverty
• People living in under resourced areas
• People with less education
• Elders [with limited resources]
Literacy & Social Determinants

A Complex Consideration

Literacy is Socially Determined
- Social Status & Geography
- Parental Skills & Resources
- Community Resources
- Quality of Schooling

Literacy is a Social Determinant
- Progress in school
- School achievement
- Work options
- Income
- Civic Participation
PIAAC Finding for Japan

Links to Social Factors

• Literacy proficiency has statistically positive relationship to participation in volunteer activities and political efficacy or the sense of influence on the political process.

• Lower levels of literacy and educational attainment are associated with negative social outcomes.
What are the Links to Health?

• Literacy assessments focus on everyday tools and skills: the skills to make use of information in various situations in everyday life.

• Skills applied to health and science information in health-related settings may differ due to unrealistic assumptions, specialized language, unfamiliar tools, social norms related to status and education . . .

• We are now exploring links and issues related to environmental health and to science in general.
Health Research Question

1993 publication of the first adult literacy survey → the start of health literacy studies

Research Question:
What are the implications for health?
Findings: Literacy is Linked to Health Outcomes

- Health Promotion
- Disease Prevention
- Screening & Early Detection
- Chronic Disease Management
- Morbidity
- Mortality

AHRQ Reviews 2004-2011
National Academies of Science
IOM Report 2004
Reports, White Papers, Calls to Action, Guidelines...
What Happens When Words Get in the Way?

For Individuals

- Get lost
- Make errors
- Run out of words
- Retreat into silence
- Cover up
- Take/be assigned a passive role

- Limited participation
- Limited advocacy
- Diminished options
- Lost entitlements
- Lost rights
- Endangered health
What Happens When Words Get in the Way?

For Society

- Increased Costs
- Fewer Contributions
- Limited Resources
- Erosion of Trust

- Inequities
- Injustice

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Dilemma

We are aware of the public’s limited skills and of the health consequence …

How do we increase literacy skills?

We, in the health and social service sectors, are not the needed literacy experts!

We cannot wait for the education sector to improve population skills.

Dr. Rudd
What Can WE Do?

Analyze characteristics of our practices, our institutions, our social services and health systems

Identify barriers

Remove barriers to information, care, services
Consider Our Public Health, Health Care, and Social Service

Focus on our skills, our work, our communication, our practices:

Examine the capacity of professionals and institutions to provide accessible information and to support the active engagement of people seeking information, care, and services.

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Health Literacy Practice Intent:
- Improve Communication
- Build Trust
- Remove Barriers
- Leave no one behind

Health Literacy Informed Action in support of:
- Democratization of Knowledge
- Health Equity
- Social Justice
Errors & Corrections

Error:
We had been too limited in our understanding of literacy

Correction:
Literacy skills Include
• Reading & Writing
• Speaking & Listening
• Math & Numeracy

Literacy is an Interaction
• e.g. Between a reader & writer
• e.g. Between a speaker & listener
Errors & Corrections

Error:
We narrowly focused on the skills of the public/patients to the exclusion of other key factors

Correction:
Examine key variables such as talk and texts, tasks and contexts

Apply literacy findings:
- Literacy is influenced by the environment and is often context specific

We can ease the burden on our patients and clients by changing practice and making systemic changes
An Evolving Concept

HL as an individual characteristic
• Measures of individual skills
• Change: Skill improvement

HL as an interaction
• Measures of match between skills and texts
• Change: text improvement

HL as an outcome of social factors
• Measures of accessibility
• Change: System improvement

We must pay attention to the literacy skills of the reader or listener as well as to the communication skills of the writer or speaker.

Environmental factors influence access, concentration, comprehension, inclusion, and action.
Game: Connect All the Dots

Use 4 straight connected lines
Once you begin: Do not lift pen from paper
Boxed In: Focus on the Individual
Think outside the Box

Professionals’ Rigor and Skills
Institutional Norms, Policies & Practice

Accessible Information Texts and Tasks

Professionals’ Rigor & Skills

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**Action Model for Health Literacy**

- **Skills**
  - Recognize Skills of Individuals
  - Improve Skills of Professionals

- **Texts**
  - Clarify Talk, Postings, Materials, Displays

- **Tasks**
  - Ease Activities, Actions Responsibilities

- **Contexts**
  - Norms Expectations Practices
  - Improve Physical & Social Environment

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Action Model for Health Literacy

- **Skills**
- **Texts**
- **Tasks**
- **Contexts**

Action must involve at least 2 of the factors.

Research must involve at least 2 of the variables.
Health Literacy Key Components

1. **Skills**: of the lay public & of health professionals

2. **Texts**: Health information: written, spoken, posted, displayed

3. **Tasks**: Actions people need to take for healthful outcomes

4. **Contexts**: Environments where health related activities take place
Identified Problems

- **Individuals**: Limited literacy skills among member of the public
- **Professionals**: Limited communication skills outside of peer group
- **Texts and Tools**: Poorly designed and carelessly developed
- **Tasks**: complex actions to be undertaken without assistance
- **Institutions**: Physical as well as social barriers impede access to information, entry, care …
- **Systems**: barriers include bureaucratic, policy, practice, as well as normative behaviors
**Available Evidence**

**Documented**: Significant proportions of adults in most industrialized nations have limited literacy and numeracy skills.

**Documented**: Literacy skills are linked to social factors as well as to health outcomes.

**Documented**: Health systems and health care processes have become increasingly complex.

**Documented**: There is a profound mismatch between current literacy demands/expectations and average skills of adults.

*It is Time for Action*
1a. **Skills of the Public Action: Understand Needs**

- Become familiar with the public’s strengths and deficits
- Raise awareness
- Use literacy findings to help shape action
- Advocate for educational opportunities for all

**Assessed Population Skills**

**Surveys:** NALS, IALS, ALLS, PIAAC

- Reading
- Writing
- Numeracy
- Oral exchange
- Use of Technology
- Problem Solving
- Navigation
1b. Skills of Professionals
Action: Improve Communication

Professional Education
• Share Information about literacy and numeracy issues
• Include communication training at all levels of professional education
• Provide training in the use of available resources & tools
• Require scientific rigor for the information exchange

Practice
• Engage in Respectful Dialogue
• Take Responsibility for Clarity
• Attend to Numeracy & Data reports and displays
• Apply scientific rigor for written, spoken, and posted information
• Use Assessment tools
2. Texts
Action: Assess & Improve Texts

- Insist on a scientific approach to the development of written, posted, spoken, and displayed information
- Do the math for the recipient
- Develop materials with rigor
  - Follow guidelines
  - Pilot test with intended audience
  - Modify as needed, repeat process
  - Disseminate & test

Focus Attention on
- Vocabulary
- Jargon
- Organization
- Concepts
- Math
- Displays
- Use of technology
- Develop/Test/Revise

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3. Tasks
Action: Analyze & Ease Tasks

- Examine expectations: assigned tasks and needed activities
- Analyze demands [deconstruct tasks]
  - Consider the needed actions / activities
  - Understand the literacy skills involved
  - Understand the user perspective
  - Correct any mismatch between skills and expectations
- Ease the burden for the lay public
  - Improve tools
  - Improve directions
  - Simplify tasks
4. Contexts

Action: Assess the Environment

• Observe people, movement, settings
• Check navigation ease
• Examine policies & regulations
• Assess resources
• Analyze the normative behaviors, practices, & procedures
• Analyze the social and physical environment

Plan for Needed Change

• Identify barriers related to access to information, care, and services
• Remove barriers
• Identify and strengthen facilitating factors
Bring About Change

We have the evidence and the tools

Implications of continued inaction:
- Health Disparities
- Inequities in access to information, care and services

Needed Action:
- Accessible information [democratization of knowledge]
- Dignified exchanges and participatory engagement
- Identification and removal of barriers
Resource: HLE$^2$ Assessment Tool

Assessment for Strategic Planning

- Organizational Policies and Practices
- Navigation
- Culture & Language
- Communication
- Resource Analyses

https: hsph.harvard.edu / healthliteracy
The Appeal & Excitement of Health Literacy Work

From the Policy Perspective:
- Links to social justice
- Links to health disparities
- Links to international consensus: Literacy as a Right
  
  Universal Declaration of Human Rights, 1948

From the Practical Perspective:
- Literacy can be improved
- Communication skills can be improved
- Texts are malleable and can be made easier to access
- Processes can be examined and modified
- Environments can be examined and changed
- Action is plausible and possible

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Added Resources & References

• www.cdc.gov/healthliteracy

• https://health.gov/our-work/national-health-initiatives/health-literacy

• www.hsph.harvard.edu/healthliteracy

• sph.umd.edu/research-impact/research-centers/horowitz-center-health-literacy
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