

Poor health literacy cause for alarm

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The Healthy Communities Research Centre at UQ Ipswich is calling for a national focus on "health literacy" following the release of findings which reveal that most Australians don't have the basic knowledge to keep themselves healthy.

The recently-released findings are based on the 2006 Adult Literacy and Life Skills survey conducted by the Australian Bureau of Statistics.

Healthy Communities Research Centre Director Professor Robert Bush said that for the first time, the survey had included questions on health literacy alongside the usual measures of prose and document literacy and numeracy skills.

“This research has revealed that nine million Australians — or 60 percent of the population between the ages of 15 and 74 years — don't have the basic knowledge and skills to understand and use information about their own health,” Professor Bush said.

“The impact of such a high proportion of Australians without basic health literacy skills should be of major concern to anyone wanting to ensure people and communities are better able to promote their own health and prevent disease.

“Self managing an illness or disease and competently working with a medical or other health practitioner depends on everyone having a basic personal skill level.

"Many of our health promotion initiatives assume a basic level of literacy, such as reading a prescription label, following a basic health promotion guide or deciding when its time to consult a doctor.

“The effectiveness of medical treatments assumes patient competence for carrying out instructions. The information from this survey should send alarm bells ringing.”

Based on the survey information, the Healthy Communities Research Centre estimates that more than 500,000 Queenslanders, between the ages of 15 and 74, would report their health as less than "good". Of these, more than 350,000 people would not have basic health knowledge and skills to support their own health.

“This suggests that two out of every three people in this age bracket aren't able to easily carry out health-enhancing measures following a professional health consultation,” Professor Bush said.

“Our effectiveness to manage health promotion and disease prevention depends on, to a large extent, people having the skills to change their behaviour for better health.

“Achieving even a basic level of health literacy to join in ways to better health would seem a fundamental aspiration for Australia.”

Source: Research Australia

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