

Information materials in general practice too complex for patients

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A substantial proportion of patient information materials in general practice are written at a level too complex for the population they serve, and may contribute to increasing health inequalities, a new study has found.

Patient information leaflets (PILs) play a major role in providing information to patients to encourage participation in their healthcare, particularly management of chronic disease. A study by Dr Joanne Protheroe and colleagues at Keele University shows that less than 25% of PILs in general practice meet recommended reading level guidance and the majority would be too complex for 43% of the English population.

And they call for processes to be put in place to improve the readability and variety of content of information leaflets in GP practices.

Less than 10% of the leaflets cover managing illness, including chronic disease, such as looking after diabetes; or [health promotion](#), such as healthy diet and lifestyle.

The researchers say that "the production of information should meet appropriate and clearly defined standards across the NHS, and, given its potential impact on patient [health](#), should be considered as rigorously as the production of a new medication or procedure?"

Government policy in the UK emphasises providing patients with good

[health information](#) to encourage participation in their [health care](#), particularly for chronic disease. Patient information leaflets play a role in this, and research evidence has variously concluded that PILs affect patient health outcomes. However, many are poorly written. For PILs to fulfil their purpose, they must be read and understood; this is linked to the concept of health literacy, 'the motivation and ability to access, understand and use information in ways which promote and maintain good health.'

Of the leaflets in the study, 47.8% were classified as 'systems navigation' ([information](#) regarding services); 22.9% were disease prevention (screening and immunisations); 14.2% personal and public safety; and less than 10% were for managing illness or health promotion.

Dr Protheoe added: "Current PILs in general practices do not all promote health literacy. Information only accessible to a proportion of higher skilled patients may increase inequalities in health. Processes must be put in place to improve the readability and variety of content of PILs in GP practices."

A report on the study is featured in the *British Journal of General Practice*.

Provided by Keele University

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