

Writing health information for consumers

A fact sheet for quality managers

This fact sheet describes how you can review and improve the content and format of your organisation's written information. Making your written information easier to understand will improve your health literacy environment and also help you meet some of the requirements of the National Safety and Quality Health Service (NSQHS) Standards.

Key points

- How your organisation's health information is written can influence the way people understand and engage with your services
- Improving written consumer information can ensure people understand their care and treatment options, the decisions they can make and the action required of them
- A range of tools and guides are available to help your organisation develop, assess the quality of, and improve consumer information.

Why is written health information important?

People need clear, focused, useable and evidence-based information about their health and health care to understand how to maintain and improve their health, how to access health services, and how to prevent further illness.

The health information your organisation provides influences how people access and use your services, and may affect their decisions about how they manage their health. If information is hard to understand—if it is overly complex, with a lot of jargon and in an inappropriate format—it can act as a barrier to people's understanding of that information.

We often assume that the written health information we provide is understandable for all people. If we understand the message, then we assume it must be clear to others. However, there are many factors that influence whether a person will be able to



understand the written health information they are given. Some of these factors relate to the person who is receiving the information, and others relate to how the information is prepared and provided.

You should take a universal precautions approach to the preparation and provision of health information. It is not possible to know a person's level of literacy by looking at them, and therefore it is essential that the information you provide is accessible to a wide audience. You can do this by avoiding jargon terms and giving explanations in plain English.

How can you ensure your information is easy to understand?

Your organisation can improve the way information is designed and presented so that it is easy to understand. Some strategies to consider are:

- Using plain language
- Considering the design and layout
- Involving consumers in the process of preparing information
- Tailoring information to different cultural needs
- Assessing health information.

Using plain language

Writing in plain language (or plain English) is a way of writing and organising information so that a person can read, understand and act on the information when they first read it. It uses common everyday words, but it does not use a patronising tone or casual language.

The Canadian Public Health Association developed [Easy Does It! Plain language and clear verbal communication training manual](#) that gives advice on writing in plain language, as well as improving verbal communication. The resource recommends:

- Use active voice
- Use common words rather than technical jargon
- Use short words and short sentences
- Test what you write to ensure your consumers understand your message.

Considering the design and layout

There are many resources available to guide you through writing and designing brochures, booklets, or web content for consumers. The resource [Simply Put: A guide for creating easy-to-understand materials](#) outlines practical ways to organise information, simplify language and utilise visuals in your consumer resources.

Some of the elements to consider when preparing written information include:

- Limiting your messages to three to four messages per document
- Using lots of white space and at least size 12 font
- Employing visuals help explain the messages found in the text.

Involving consumers in the process of preparing information

Involving consumers in the development and review of consumer information is a valuable way of ensuring that the information you provide is clear, understandable and easy to use. There are many ways that you can engage with consumers in the development and review of consumer information, including hosting focus groups, online surveys and telephone interviews.

Advice on preparing written information and strategies to engage consumers in the process can be found in the [NSQHS Standard 2 Tip sheets](#). Tip sheet 5 focuses on designing and writing your documents and Tip sheet 6 concentrates on the process of seeking out and engaging consumers in the development of consumer information.

The Illawarra Shoalhaven Local Health District's [Health Literacy Framework](#), as part of their organisation-wide approach to health literacy, provides guidance on writing for consumers and tools and templates for capturing and recording the views of consumers when developing and testing written materials.

Tailoring information for culturally and linguistically diverse communities

Many health services might identify a need to communicate health information to a variety of culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) communities. Providing information to consumers from CALD communities may involve tailoring and translating information so that it is easy to understand.

To assist you with developing translated consumer resources, there are a range of guides available to assist you with the process including Queensland Health's [Practical Guide to Organising Translations](#), the Victorian Office of Multicultural Affairs and Citizenship's [Effective Translations](#) and NSW Multicultural Health Communication Service's [Guidelines for the Production of Multilingual Resources](#).

Key steps include:

- Preparing a plan for what information you need to translate
- Ensuring the information is tailored for the intended audience; that it is relevant and culturally respectful
- Establishing a consultation group with consumer representatives from each language group to assist with reviewing the translated information
- Organising the English text to be translated and proofread by an accredited translator
- Regularly evaluating and reviewing the translation to ensure the information is current.

Tailoring information for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people

When developing communication material for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people it is important to respect their history, beliefs and values. Community consultation and involvement is an essential part of developing culturally respectful and meaningful resources.

The NSW Department of Community Services has developed the [Working with Aboriginal Peoples and Communities: A practice resource](#) that contains practical tips on communicating with respect and sensitivity, use of appropriate language, and advice on building rapport and participation. The resource was written to support Aboriginal communities within NSW; however, the engagement and communication principles and strategies could be tailored and used in other local communities as well.

The [Australian Indigenous HealthInfoNet](#) is another useful resource for finding guidance and health promotion material to support tailored communication with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.

Assessing health information

The best way of assessing health information is to test it with the type of consumers who will be using it. You can help ensure that the information meets the needs of your audience using methods such as:

- Having discussions with consumers in waiting rooms
- Conducting a survey
- Convening a focus group.

With each of these methods you can discuss whether the information you have developed is easy to read, if the key messages are clear and whether all of the necessary information is included.

There are also some structured assessments and tools that can be used to check the quality and reliability of the information. The [Health Literacy Checklist](#) for written consumer resources is a resource developed by the North Western Melbourne Primary Health Network, which can assist you to review written information developed for consumers. The checklist provides guidance on developing information, as well as assessing readability, and processes for review and testing by consumers.

The [DISCERN tool](#) is a brief questionnaire that provides a valid and reliable way of assessing the quality of written information on treatment choices. Some of the criteria assessed by the tool include whether the information resource:

- Has explicit aims and is relevant to consumers
- Describes how treatment works, including the risks and benefits of treatment, and what would happen without treatment
- Makes it clear there may be more than one possible treatment choice
- Provides balanced and unbiased information and a list of further sources of information.

Links with the National Safety and Quality Health Service Standards

Currently, the National Safety and Quality Health Service (NSQHS) Standards include a number of actions related to health literacy and supporting partnerships with consumers. These actions focus on ensuring that consumers are involved in reviewing information that is prepared within the organisation and that they are engaged in the governance of the organisation.

The NSQHS Standards (second edition) will be released in late 2017 and health services will need to be assessed against this edition when they are accredited from January 2019. The NSQHS Standards (2nd ed.) have a much more overt focus on health literacy. There are new actions in the Clinical Governance Standard that focus on the physical environment, including signage and way-finding. There are also actions within the Partnering with Consumers and Comprehensive Care Standards which focus on developing and providing easy-to-understand information, sharing decision making, engaging in partnerships for care planning, and the delivery of comprehensive goal-directed care.

Further information

Further information and resources about health literacy, including other fact sheets in this series, are available on the Australian Commission on Safety and Quality in Health Care website.

Website: www.safetyandquality.gov.au/our-work/patient-and-consumer-centred-care/health-literacy/.

Resource list

Canadian Public Health Association. Easy does it! Plain language and clear verbal communication training manual. Ottawa: Canadian Public Health Association, 1998. Available from: http://www.cpha.ca/uploads/portals/h-l/easy_does_it_e.pdf

Australian Commission on Safety and Quality in Health Care. National Safety and Quality in Health Services Standards - Standard 2 Tip Sheets. Sydney: Australian Commission on Safety and Quality in Health Care, 2014. <https://www.safetyandquality.gov.au/publications/nsqhs-standard-2-partnering-with-consumers-tip-sheets/>

Illawarra Shoalhaven Local Health District Health Literacy Framework: A Plan for Becoming a Health Literate Organisation 2012 - 2015. Warrawong: Illawarra Shoalhaven Local Health District, 2010. Available at: <http://www.cec.health.nsw.gov.au/quality-improvement/people-and-culture/person-centred-care/partnering-with-patients/lhd-examples>

Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Simply Put, a guide for creating easy-to-understand materials. Atlanta: Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2009. Available at: https://cdc.gov/healthliteracy/pdf/Simply_Put.pdf

Queensland Health. Practical guide to organising translations. Brisbane: Queensland Health, 2007. Available at: https://www.health.qld.gov.au/_data/assets/pdf_file/0025/159622/9mcsr_trnsltn_gde2.pdf

Office of Multicultural Affairs and Citizenship. Effective Translations. Victorian Government Guidelines on Policy and Procedures. Melbourne: Office of Multicultural Affairs and Citizenship, 2014. Available at: <http://www.multicultural.vic.gov.au/images/stories/documents/2014/omac%20effective%20translations%20guidelines%20on%20policy%20and%20procedures%20%20online.pdf>

Multicultural Health Communication Service. Guidelines for the Production of Multilingual Resources. Sydney: NSW Ministry of Health, 2017. Available at: <http://www.mhcs.health.nsw.gov.au/policiesandguidelines/supportinfo/pdf/guidelines.pdf>

NSW Department of Community Services. Working with Aboriginal people and communities - a practical resource. Ashfield: NSW Department of Community Services, 2009. Available at: http://www.community.nsw.gov.au/_data/assets/pdf_file/0017/321308/working_with_aboriginal.pdf

Australian Indigenous HealthInfoNet [website]. Available at: <http://www.healthinfonet.ecu.edu.au>

North Western Melbourne Primary Health Network. Health Literacy Checklist for Written Consumer Resources. Melbourne: North Western Melbourne PHN, 2014. Available at: <http://nwmpnhn.org.au/uploads/ckpg/files/Services/Health%20Literacy/PD003-Health-Literacy-Checklist.pdf>

DISCERN tool and handbook [website]. Available at: <http://www.discern.org.uk>