

Health 49% Professionals	5 %	
	Internet	36%
	Television	31%
	Friends and Family	21%
	Books	16%
	Radio	9%
	Newspapers	9%
	Magazines	9%

But people, potential patients, selections differed when characterized by literacy. Individuals with poorer literacy made use of health professionals and the internet less often. The reasons for that may be attributed to the fact that the internet remains, for all the pictures and videos, an information source navigated by reading. Or it may be that literacy and income are fellow travelers, where those with less literacy have less income and access to physicians.

Individuals with poor numeracy, a skill vital to understanding risk and benefit, sought health information from books, newspapers, magazines, and TV. Again the underlying reason is unknown, but we can conjecture that these formats are based around storytelling – a means of conveying information with few if any numbers or ratios.

For all the regulatory effort to provide risk and benefit information or useful drug pricing, many American adults simply cannot process the information. It is like our regulatory efforts for food labeling. Here is what one study reported.

“Poor label comprehension was highly correlated with low-level literacy and numeracy skills, but even patients with higher literacy could have difficulties interpreting labels.”

I could find no similar study for those direct-to-consumer drug advertisements. The literature speaks about its effect on consumer behavior, not comprehension. Evidence-informed policy begins with evidence, and the evidence here is clear, American adults with lower levels of health literacy need something more than advertisements and stories to make informed health decisions, and we are failing to provide that information. Regulation will not correct a lack of literacy or numeracy; perhaps it is time that we require competency in basic life skills from our education system. Where is Home Economics and Health classes when you need them?

[1] Health professionals, Internet, television, friends and family, books, newspapers, magazines, and radio

[2] If level 5 could answer ten questions correctly, level 4 would only get 5 of them correct, and level 3 would only get 2 or 3 correct.

Source: Literacy, Numeracy and Health Information Seeking Among Middle-Aged and Older Adults in the United States Journal of Aging and Health DOI: 10.1177/089826431880918

COPYRIGHT © 1978-2016 BY THE AMERICAN COUNCIL ON SCIENCE AND HEALTH

Source URL: <https://www.acsh.org/news/2019/02/05/health-literacy-understanding-physicians-explanations-are-big-problem-13785>

Links

[1] <https://www.flickr.com/photos/olliebray/3488107095>