



## **Play Your Part – Empower People to Play An Active Role in their Care**

*This article suggests a few tips and techniques that you may use in your everyday interactions with the health service to enable you to engage more actively in your care or the care of your loved ones.*

The Health Literacy initiative was launched in January 2024 as a collaboration between a number of patient advocacy groups in Ireland. Patients, service users and carers play an increasingly crucial role in health care and this will only grow in the future with increasing life expectancy and an ageing population.

We are calling on our Government to implement a joined-up approach to health literacy in healthcare, education, and community settings, including through schools from an early age to **empower people to engage and be active partners in their own care and the care of their loved ones**. This approach will produce improved health outcomes, improve patient safety and lead to a more efficient health service.

### [Benefits of Health Literacy](#)

According to NALA and confirmed by international reports from the World Health Organisation and others, when patients are treated as partners in their care and are enabled to be active partners in their own care, significant gains are made in safety, patient satisfaction and health outcomes. **A health service with empowered and engaged patients is a safer and more effective service,** contributing to:

- Improved health and health outcomes for patients
- Better patient and professional relationships – shared decision-making
- Improved understanding of medication information, instructions and adherence
- Reduced risk of serious health problems resulting from misunderstanding and communication
- Reduced harm and waste from under-provision and over-provision
- Reduced presentations to A&E
- Reduced re-admissions and repeat appointments
- Reduced health inequalities

Furthermore, the EU Health Literacy Survey (2021) showed that 43% of people in Ireland have 'limited' health literacy. This has great implications for the health service and practitioners and makes health literacy a key issue to delivering a quality service with patient safety as a core goal.

## What is Health Literacy?

The WHO defines Health Literacy as “the ability to find, read, understand, and use healthcare information.” This includes how to access and navigate the healthcare system. Health literacy is in effect, the corner stone of how people get the most out of healthcare information. This includes accessing our own health information and understanding how to understand and use it for our own benefit. Many of us rely on our healthcare professionals to also be our teachers when it comes to understanding health matters; without that input the health literacy of our population would be much lower.

When a person is ill, they may not be in the state of mind to absorb information about their condition. **Health literacy is a life skill that should be taught to all students through education in our primary and secondary schools, during those early formative years.** Timely health education has the potential to give people autonomy, to help them avoid some of the pitfalls and habits that ultimately lead to poor health, this coupled with health literacy would surely benefit society by creating informed people who become conscious consumers and wiser users of health care services.

Healthcare professionals often work in extremely stressful environments. Under pressure of a huge workload it can be hard to remember that there is an imbalance of power between healthcare professionals and the patient. This can have a range of negative effects on patients' experience of care. Empowered patients with the knowledge, skills, and confidence to engage with healthcare professionals will enable patient understanding and improved collaboration – leading to fewer patient visits and better outcomes.

## Simple Tools to Improve Communications with Healthcare Professionals

### *Communicating with Healthcare Professionals*

When attending an appointment it is natural to feel anxious and many people struggle to communicate effectively or ask the questions that they want or need to ask. When you are feeling poorly, you may not be in an emotional state to absorb information about your condition. This can be even more difficult when the information is written e.g. in a letter or online, or verbal over the telephone. People may feel uncomfortable admitting that they are struggling with the information being provided.

You should expect the healthcare professional to:

- Slow down and spend time explaining and listening wherever possible
- Use plain, non medical language
- Limit the amount of information provided at each meeting and check with you to confirm your understanding
- Create a shame-free environment where you can ask questions and be open about anything you are unsure about

Two helpful techniques include **Ask Me 3** from the [Institute for Healthcare Improvement](#) and **BRAN** from [Choosing Wisely UK](#) provide key questions and tools to assist in making better decisions and communication for patients and carers towards understanding health conditions and becoming more active and knowledgeable in self-care.

*Questions to Ask Your Healthcare Professionals:*

<b>Ask Me 3 (IHI): Good Questions for Your Good Health</b>	<b>BRAN (Choosing Wisely UK)</b>
<ol style="list-style-type: none"><li>1. What is my main problem?</li><li>2. What do I need to do?</li><li>3. Why is it important for me to do this?</li></ol>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"><li>1. What are the <b>B</b>enefits?</li><li>2. What are the <b>R</b>isks ?</li><li>3. What are the <b>A</b>lternatives?</li><li>4. What if I do <b>N</b>othing?</li></ol>
<a href="#"><u>Ask Me 3: Institute for Healthcare Improvement</u></a>	<a href="#"><u>BRAN: Choosing Wisely UK</u></a>

*Medication Safety:*

Knowing what medicines you take and how you take them helps everyone involved to make correct decisions about your care. Healthcare professionals need to know all of the medicines you are taking, to check that medicines and combinations are effective and safe. Having an up-to-date, written or printed list of your medicines can help:

- when you might not be able to remember your medications, for example, at an appointment or in an emergency
- reduce the chance of errors
- when requesting a repeat prescription from your GP, make sure to keep a copy for yourself

To fill out a medicines list you need all your medicines in front of you. Include all the medicines you take regularly and occasionally.

**All medicines count**, including:

- prescription medicines - don't forget to include inhalers, patches, injections, creams, eye drops and any other prescribed products etc and include the strength of each medicine (e.g. 50mg), how much you take each day (e.g. 2 tablets) and the time (e.g. at night)
- over-the-counter medicines
- vitamins and other supplements
- herbal, homeopathic or alternative medicines

The list should also include:

- any allergies you have
- the contact numbers of your family doctor and pharmacist

The information above, and a handy form you can use to make your list can be found on <https://safermeds.ie>. The form can be downloaded from [My Medicines List](#)

