

Principles for Written Communication* with Consumers

Effective communication with patients and other consumers is important to encourage people to make informed decisions about their own care and to take good care of themselves. Consumers are less likely to be engaged if they have trouble understanding health care messages and materials.

Everyone involved in providing, managing and paying for health care should communicate openly and effectively with consumers. Health care is complex. Letters, handouts, forms, bills, benefit descriptions and other materials that are confusing can discourage consumers from taking an active role in their own health and health care.

To encourage greater engagement, the Health Alliance Consumer Advisory Group recommends that every organization that communicates with consumers about health care apply core principles to all written materials, either print or online.

1. **Respectful.** Written communication should:

- Be balanced by noting the positive in addition to improvements needed. The health care system involves many groups, including doctors, hospitals, employers, health plans and government. Each make valuable contributions and each is partly to blame for the problems.
- Be culturally appropriate, recognizing that there may be key elements of a person's culture and beliefs that need to be addressed.

2. **Clear language.** Effective messages, whether spoken or in writing, should:

- Be brief and use simple, plain language. Avoid jargon, acronyms and idioms.
- Use fewer words per sentence and fewer syllables per word. In writing, the goal is no more than a 9th grade reading level. See *Readers' Digest* as an example.
- Be in the consumer's primary language or at least in very simple English.
- Include examples to help with meaning. For instance, by itself, the phrase "health care quality" means little to most consumers.

3. **Easy-to-use format.** Written materials should use:

- Use a font size no smaller than 12 point, with plenty of white space.
- Charts and numbered lists where possible. Ideally, the list will have no more than 12 items, without too many sub-points under each.
- Printed and electronic formats, if possible. Electronic versions of text can easily work with assistive technology, which is very helpful for people with disabilities.

4. **Relevant and Useful.** Content should:

- Focus on why a consumer would care. Make sure the message is clear about "what's in it for a consumer?" and "how will a consumer use this information?"
- Always include a phone number and an email address, so consumers know how they can ask questions or get more information.

Note: The text on this page is a reading grade-level of 8.3 (between 8th and 9th grade).

** For effective verbal communication with consumers, specialized training is strongly recommended.*