

Assessing Health Literacy Levels in Singapore: A Pilot Study in a Public Hospital

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Introduction

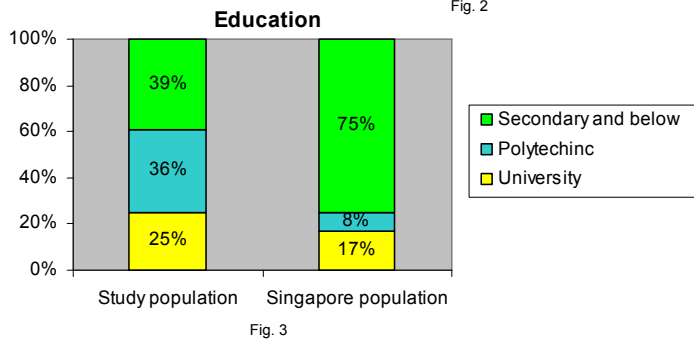
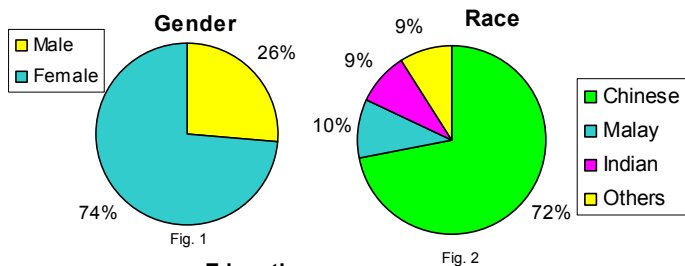
Health literacy is the ability of individuals to obtain, process and understand health information to make appropriate health decisions¹. Low health literacy leads to poor communication between patients and healthcare providers and ultimately to poorer health outcomes². Health literacy is not well researched in Singapore. A study was undertaken to ascertain general health literacy levels among patients in Singapore with the hope of improving communication between patients and healthcare providers in the future.

Methodology

- A 22-item questionnaire comprising 3 sections: General Literacy, Health Knowledge and Healthcare System was developed.
- The pilot study was administered over 4 days at a hospital pharmacy.

Results and Discussion

- There were 300 respondents with a response rate of 67%.
- Average age of participants was 44 years.



•Ethnic distribution of study population approximated that of Singapore's population.

•Educational levels of study population was not representative of Singapore's population with 61% of respondents having a minimum of polytechnic or university education, compared to 25% of Singapore's population.

Questions on Health Knowledge

- Less than 50% of respondents understood health concepts like Body Mass Index (BMI) and balanced diet.
- More than 90% of respondents understood the harmful effects of smoking.

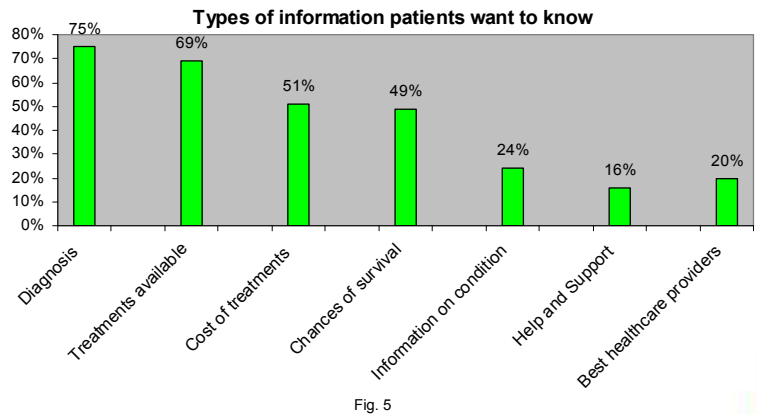
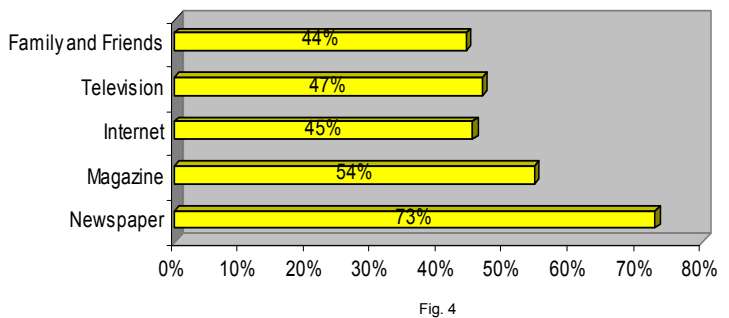
Questions on Healthcare System and Financing

- More than 70% of patients understood MediSave, MediShield and financial counseling options available to them.
- 39% of respondents were unaware of the amount of subsidy entitlements for C-class patients.
- More highly educated respondents tended to get questions on healthcare system and financing correct.

Questions on patients' behaviour and perceptions

- Almost 90% of patients understood their doctors' and pharmacists' instructions.
- Only 37% of patients felt that they were able to express their concerns to hospital staff effectively.

Modes through which patients obtained information on health issues



Conclusion

- Patients in general felt that they were able to understand their healthcare providers but only a minority of them could effectively express their concerns to these healthcare providers. As such, patients need to be empowered to better express their views to healthcare providers.
- Patients reflected low scores in general health knowledge except in the area of smoking. Since most patients obtain their health information via the newspapers, magazines and television, educating patients to better express their concerns and to improve their general health knowledge can be done via these mediums.
- Patients should have full access to information that they desire, which includes the details of diagnosis, their treatment options and the related costs.

References

1. Nutbeam D. Health literacy as a public health goal: a challenge for contemporary health education and communication strategies into the 21st century. *Health Promot Int* 2000; 15:259-67
2. Schillinger D, Grumbach, K. et al. "Literacy and health outcomes: A systematic review of the literature." *Journal of General Internal Medicine*, 2004;19, 1228-1239