



Capacity Building Workshops 2014/15 Health Literacy in a Healthy City: Making the Case and Taking Action



WHO Advisor, Erica Ison; Chief Medical Officer for Northern Ireland, Michael McBride; Glen McCrum, Greater Village Regeneration Trust; Joan Devlin, Belfast Healthy Cities; Fergus Dolan, National Adult Literacy Agency Ireland; Judy Kurth, Safer and Healthy Communities, Public Health, City of Stoke on Trent and Christine Hoy, Health and Social Care Alliance Scotland.

On Wednesday 10 December, Belfast Healthy Cities, hosted a seminar to promote and examine the relatively new topic of Health Literacy. The event included contributions from a WHO expert, experienced health practitioners from across the UK and Ireland, and local health and wellbeing professionals.

WHO defines health literacy as 'linked to literacy and entails people's knowledge, motivation and competences to access, understand, appraise and apply health information in order to make judgments and take decisions in everyday life concerning health care, disease prevention and health promotion to maintain or improve quality of life during the life course' (Health Literacy: The Solid Facts)

Research shows that people with low health literacy make more mistakes with medication or treatment, are less able to follow treatment instructions and lack the skills needed to negotiate the healthcare system (WHO, 2013). This results in fewer people attending screening services, higher numbers attending A&E, increased hospitalisation and re-hospitalisation along with increased morbidity and premature death. Improved health literacy helps patients to understand medical instructions and information and to make more informed decisions, which will benefit their health.

The event was opened by the Chief Medical Officer for Northern Ireland, Michael McBride who highlighted the challenges and potential benefits of bringing about a higher level of health literacy locally.

Michael McBride said,

“Making Life Better, the strategic framework for public health, identifies health literacy as a key concern for population health in Northern Ireland, and is vital to efforts to reduce inequalities in health.

The range of health information and complexity of the healthcare system can be confusing to navigate, and even more so for the most vulnerable in our society. Improving the ability of people with lower levels of health literacy to access and understand health information can enhance their ability to take responsibility for their own health, and over time reduce for example issues related to medicine management.”

Welcoming the seminar Belfast Healthy Cities Chief Executive, Joan Devlin said,

“The challenge for health professionals is to find ways to support people and communities to take control of their own health and wellbeing, and make good decisions for themselves by ensuring the information provided is clearly understood.

We have long established community projects in Belfast working to empower people and communities. While Health Literacy may be a relatively new concept for Belfast, many cities in the United Kingdom, Ireland and across the WHO European region have seen the substantial benefits that can be delivered by encouraging new attitudes to health. We are delighted some of those are with us today as we begin a process of working together to develop health literacy action programmes.”

Other contributors from areas who have successfully implemented strategies included Christine Hoy, Health and Social Care Alliance Scotland, Fergus Dolan, Literacies Development Worker, National Adult Literacy Agency, Ireland and Judy Kurth, Strategic Manager, Safer and Healthy Communities, Public Health, City of Stoke on Trent.

The workshop was facilitated by WHO Expert Advisor Erica Ison, a leading academic with more than twenty years’ experience of implementing health strategies.

Presentations from the event are available on the [Belfast Healthy Cities website](#)