

Belfast Healthy Cities, a World Health Organization project in Northern Ireland, today hosted a seminar examining the emerging issue of Health Literacy. Chief Medical Officer Dr Michael McBride attended the event and helped launch a new online Health Literacy resource designed to highlight this area.

Other speakers from the WHO in Finland shared their experience and knowledge on how health literacy can support the health and wellbeing of citizens and health professionals. Health Literacy is linked to basic literacy skills.

Low health literacy has real effects on health and illness; people with low health literacy levels make more mistakes with medication or treatment. Those people also rate their health as lower and are more likely to have unhealthy lifestyles. In Northern Ireland 18% of working age adults perform at the lowest literacy levels. Health literacy is a catalyst for change and needed for people to understand and act upon health information.

Fundamentally health literacy is a way to help and support people to make better use of information.

Michael McBride said

“Health literacy affects people’s control over their own health and wellbeing and must therefore be a key component of our efforts to improve health and wellbeing and reduce inequalities in health - this is emphasised in Northern Ireland’s public health strategy Making Life Better which has a vision that **“all people are enabled and supported in achieving their full health and wellbeing potential.”**

There has been significant research internationally and locally in relation to health literacy and health improvement. Today’s seminar will share learning and explore practical application of how health literacy can help tackle inequalities. The new online resource is a welcome addition to the Health Literacy landscape and will help in the ongoing effort to reduce health inequalities.”

Belfast Healthy Cities Chief Executive Joan Devlin stated,

“People are increasingly exposed to complex health related information and becoming a health-literate person can be a real challenge. Importantly, we now understand that poor health literacy does adversely affect people’s health. Literacy has been shown to be one of the strongest predictors of health status along with age, income, employment status, education level and race or ethnic group. Improving health literacy is therefore an important component of improving health overall.”

Professor Sanna Salanterä, University of Turku in Finland, outlined how a regional programme, *Games for Health* has helped to develop health literacy skills of children in the Turku region.

Joanne Morgan, Chief Executive, Community Development Health Network, highlighted a number of programmes running locally to improve the health literacy skills of people in communities, in particular the work of the *Building Community-Pharmacy Project*.

The online resource launched today has been developed by the cross sectoral partners of the Belfast Healthy Cities health literacy working group to highlight examples of health literacy within policy and practice locally. Cross-sectoral partners include Community Development Health Network, Belfast Health and Social Care Trust, Cancer Focus NI,

Queen's University and Belfast City Council. The resource features case studies which will be updated quarterly.

The resource is now available at <http://www.belfasthealthycities.com/health-literacy>

Other speakers at today's event included

Dr Bernadette Cullen, Chair of Health Literacy Working Group Belfast Healthy Cities

Karolina Mackiewicz, Development Manager, Baltic Region Healthy Cities Association

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