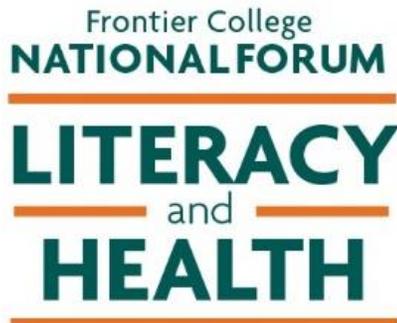


DISCUSSION PAPER

LITERACY AND HEALTH



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About Frontier College

Frontier College is a national charitable literacy organization, established in 1899 on the belief that literacy is a right. Each year, we recruit and train 2,500+ volunteer tutors who work with more than 30,000 children, youth, and adults. frontiercollege.ca

Great-West Life, London Life, and Canada Life has generously supported the cause of literacy at Frontier College since 1999.

Evidence suggests that investing in literacy will benefit individuals, communities, and the country as a whole.

What are we waiting for?

Literacy and Health: Context and Connections

Despite Canada's universal healthcare system, not all Canadians have the same opportunities to enjoy good health. There are many interconnected factors affecting our health and wellbeing. Literacy is one of those factors. Research by the Public Health Agency of Canada, among others, confirms that literacy is a determinant of health,ⁱ and that people with low literacy levels are much more likely to experience poor health.ⁱⁱ

The stigma surrounding low literacy, and medical systems and practices that assume strong literacy skills, may impact a person's ability to find and use the health services and products they need. In some situations, low literacy can be a life-or-death matter.

Imagine not being able to interpret written instructions from your doctor, or calculate the correct dosage of medication for yourself or a loved one. Imagine not being able to access community health programs because you can't read the signage advertising their services. Imagine not being able to work safely because you have difficulty decoding the health and safety information you receive as part of employee training. Canadians with low literacy skills face barriers when seeking healthcare for themselves, their children, or other people in their care.

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Strong literacy skills help people:

- ✓ communicate effectively with healthcare practitioners
- ✓ navigate health and medical systems
- ✓ make informed treatment decisions
- ✓ seek out and read about preventive options that support health, wellness, and personal safety
- ✓ effectively manage chronic disease risk factors
- ✓ properly use medications and other health supports and therapies
- ✓ participate in public dialogue about healthcare, public health, and social services in Canada

Literacy as a Determinant of Health

Statistics Canada defines literacy as:

“[U]sing printed and written information to function in society, to achieve one’s goals, and to develop one’s knowledge and potential.”

Literacy is measured on a scale of 1 to 5, with Level 5 being the highest level, and Level 3 being roughly equivalent to high school completion. At Level 1 and below, people face significant difficulty navigating text in their day-to-day lives. 17% of Canadian adults have literacy skills in this range.ⁱⁱⁱ These highest-needs Canadians, who number in the millions and live across all provinces and territories, face gaps in their literacy skills that directly impact their health and the health of their families.^{iv}

The future of literacy in Canada

Canadian Council on Learning’s 2010 projections show that approximately 15 million adult Canadians by 2031 will have low literacy — a 25% increase from 30 years previous (2001).^v

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Low literacy skills can negatively affect people's capacity to:

- find and maintain steady employment^{vi}
- secure high-quality housing in safe areas that have lower rates of pollution and fewer environmental hazards^{vii}
- make informed healthcare decisions for their children^{viii}

For many people, low literacy is part of a wall of compounding barriers to health and wellbeing: poor physical health, compromised mental health, limited mobility, low income, and social isolation can easily reinforce one another.

The relationship between literacy and health literacy

Literacy, as an essential skill, is fundamental to "health literacy," which the Public Health Agency of Canada defines as:

"The ability to access, comprehend, evaluate, and communicate information as a way to promote, maintain, and improve health in a variety of settings across the life-course."

Reading, writing, and numeracy are the backbone of health literacy. In fact, research shows that strengthening literacy skills helps people to improve their health literacy. The Canadian Council on Learning finds that daily reading habits have the single strongest effect on health literacy proficiency.^{ix}

Healthy Individuals, Healthy Society

Each person's health and wellbeing is part of the overall health of Canadian society. A thriving society includes a population that is physically and mentally healthy, civically engaged, and invested in the wellbeing of its members.^x It has healthcare systems that respond to the needs of all who use them. It has robust, inclusive public institutions. It recognizes the strength in diversity, and the value of all voices. Strong literacy and essential skills support this vision of Canadian nationhood.

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“Higher literacy can boost the economic and financial success of individuals and the economy as a whole. It can reduce poverty, improve health, lift community engagement, and lead to a higher standard of living. In fact, it is hard to identify any other single issue that can have such a large payoff to individuals, the economy, and society.”

Craig Alexander, Former Vice President and Deputy Chief Economist, TD Bank Group

At Frontier College, we see first-hand that strengthening people’s literacy skills is an effective, low-cost way to improve health and wellbeing for both individuals and communities, across many dimensions of private and public life. Research shows that Canadians with higher levels of literacy, numeracy, and problem-solving skills report better health and stronger connections with their communities and society.^{xii}

The Gaps in “Universal” Healthcare

We know that Canada’s universal healthcare system doesn’t benefit us all equally. Systemic barriers to literacy and systemic barriers to healthcare are linked.^{xiii} These barriers disproportionately affect some groups of Canadians, including: Indigenous people; immigrants to Canada; people with disabilities; single parents; and seniors.^{xiv}

“Learners [who are newcomers, and who speak English as an additional language] say they have found it very hard to communicate their health needs, given the language barrier. Often there are not words that directly translate from one language to another, or the learners do not have the resources to help them understand the English words. After attending literacy-based health sessions, they hope to be better prepared when navigating the healthcare system.” – Frontier College Regional Coordinator, Winnipeg

Additionally, healthcare facilities in northern and rural areas are fewer and more dispersed than in southern, urban areas. The resulting lack of services, or delay, cost, and travel required to access services, disproportionately affects people living in northern communities^{xv}. Technology may have a role to play in providing health services in the north, and elsewhere in the country, but there are still challenges. A 2017 national survey found that 4 in 10 nurses say current digital health technology systems are not adequate for their needs.^{xvi}

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“*This is Canada. I think all Canadians should get the same services as people that live down south.*”^{xvii} – Resident of Bearskin Lake First Nation, and dialysis patient

However, there are also reasons for optimism. Transformative ideas from Indigenous physicians, academics, and leaders are helping to shape discussions of healthcare policy and practice.^{xviii} ^{xix} Clinicians and media experts are partnering to empower parents through accessible, video-based health resources.^{xx} Major corporations have realized the role that business can play in championing literacy among newcomers to Canada.^{xxi}

But this is just the beginning. We need more research into the links between barriers to literacy and barriers to health. We need active involvement from all segments and sectors of society. **We need to take action together.**

Moving Forward

Frontier College's National Forum on Literacy and Health aims to bring together a wide variety of participants to discuss the role of literacy in improving health in our country. Together, we can generate momentum for improved literacy and better health and wellbeing for all.

Frontier College believes that literacy is a key component of a healthy society. We recommend that governments, healthcare providers, community services, employers, researchers, charities, and individuals work together to create policies and practices that support people facing literacy barriers.

Discussion Questions:

- What are current best practices in literacy and health that can be replicated and scaled across the country?
- How can we improve the usability of health and safety information for everyone, across all sectors?
- What can be done to strengthen the profile of literacy as a vital component of healthcare practice and policy?

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