

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Health literacy is the “ability to access, understand, evaluate and communicate information as a way to promote, maintain and improve health in a variety of settings across the life-course.” For gay men health literacy skills are critical to sexual health, particularly today given the increasing complexity of HIV risk and prevention information, and wide variety of means through which it is available (especially online). Gay men have been - and continue to be - active creators of practical knowledge by incorporating emerging scientific information into prevention strategies, and many current health promotion efforts for gay men are focused on aspects of health literacy. However, a robust health literacy approach includes focusing not just on gay men as users of information, but also the providers of information (e.g., service providers, health agencies, other sectors), within a broader consideration of social, structural or system factors affecting user-provider relationships.

This report describes the findings from a planning meeting held October 29-31, 2014 in conjunction with the 10th Annual BC Gay Men’s Health Summit, which brought together researchers, service providers, policy-makers and knowledge users to discuss and describe perspectives of health literacy and its relevance to gay men’s sexual health and HIV prevention, in order to establish a foundation for future research on this topic.

The first part of our meeting was based on a series of presentations and discussions integrated within the Summit itself, which are summarized in this report. Topics spanned:

- Review of the core concepts of health literacy and numeracy;
- How these concepts have been or could be applied to gay men’s sexual health;
- Factors which influence how gay men experience or perceive sexual risk;
- Challenges and opportunities for translating or communicating risk information to gay men;
- How gay men use and view the Internet as a source of health information, and appraising how this information is presented on health agency websites;

- How gay men understand and make sense of new biomedical HIV prevention technologies; such as pre-exposure prophylaxis, or treatment as prevention.

For the second part of our meeting, we convened a one-day workshop to further discuss the topics raised at the Summit, and to identify key knowledge gaps and research questions related to sexual health literacy for gay men. We used a world café format to foster a collaborative dialogue on the relevance of health literacy to gay men’s sexual health. Discussion notes were organized into themes, along with the knowledge gaps and research questions identified from each theme. Workshop participants also brainstormed possible interventions that could be employed to improve sexual health literacy for gay men.

The information we gathered, both through the Summit presentations and the following workshop, led our team to describe an emerging framework for sexual health literacy for gay men (see Figure 1). This framework recognizes the central importance of the health information itself, the importance of addressing health literacy skills for both users and providers, and a range of user- and provider-specific factors that may be avenues for further research or intervention. The framework also recognizes the fundamental influence of system factors, both social and structural, across all aspects of sexual health literacy.

To move a research agenda forward based on this framework, better understanding existing health literacy skills of gay men and providers, and how these are influenced by identified system factors, is a crucial starting point. We also need research that will lead to developing and testing health literacy interventions of gay men, including ideas proposed during the meeting. Through this planning meeting we have indeed established the foundation for these future research collaborations. At the same time, we have confirmed our need to achieve a fuller understanding of the complex relationships between, and effective interventions for improving, health literacy and sexual health for gay men.

Figure 1: Emerging framework for Sexual Health Literacy for Gay Men

