

# LOW LITERACY, HIGH RISK

## THE HIDDEN CHALLENGE FACING HEALTH CARE IN CALIFORNIA



### Results from a Pilot Study of the California Health Literacy Initiative

#### OVERVIEW

California struggles with a silent and invisible threat to the health of millions of its citizens. That threat is low health literacy, defined as "the ability to read, understand, and act upon health information." Literacy skills are a stronger predictor of health status than a range of other categories, including race/ethnicity, income, age, employment status, and educational level, (Partnership for Clear Health Communication, 2003). More than five million Californians, one in four adults, are "functionally illiterate" (National Adult Literacy Survey, 1992). This has created what is frequently referred to as a "mismatch" between the high literacy levels required to successfully obtain quality health care and the significantly lower literacy levels of many patients. The negative consequences of this mismatch range from problematic to catastrophic.

#### METHODOLOGY

This pilot study was designed as an investigation of how literacy impacts the health care experiences of California's low literate adult patients, to assess how health literacy is being taken into consideration as California's low literate adults seek health care services, and to create a foundation for future research. The pilot study surveyed 102 low literate patients, 64 physicians, and 16 hospital and clinic administrators throughout the state.

#### KEY STUDY FINDINGS

The study found that low literate adults in California are marginalized by the health care system because the process of obtaining health care requires specialized knowledge that only highly literate individuals can easily and consistently access.

#### Challenge #1: Painful Paperwork Delays Care

Many participants claimed that the single most difficult aspect of participating in the health care process is completing paperwork.

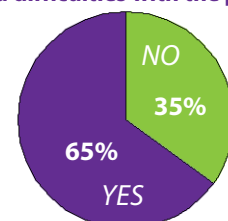
*"I wanted to say that I was allergic to a certain medication, but I don't know how to write it."*

**Over 80 percent had trouble completing medical paperwork, and 45 percent considered completing medical paperwork one of their greatest health literacy challenges.**

Many participants delayed or avoided care because of their need to have someone accompany them to office visits.

*"I procrastinated and it prolonged my illness. I had to have someone go with me to the doctor and had to set my appointments around my family's schedule. I want to know by myself, but I have to depend on my family."*

Have you ever avoided going to the doctor because you had difficulties with the paperwork?



**65 percent of participants reported avoiding going to the doctor because of difficulties associated with completing paperwork.**





