Health literacy is a promising way to promote healthy behaviour, ensure health equity and drive progress towards the Sustainable Development Goals.

Health literacy is defined as the ability of individuals to “gain access to, understand and use information in ways which promote and maintain good health” for themselves, their families and their communities (1). Health literacy affects people’s abilities to interact with health-care providers, make informed health decisions, engage in self-management, navigate health systems, access health information and understand health messages in the public domain (2, 3). Through the life course, health literacy is a dynamic quality that applies not only to individual skills, but also to societies and organizations (4). Health literacy responsiveness, also referred to as organizational health literacy, refers to the ways in which services, organizations and systems make health information and resources available and accessible to people, according to their health literacy strengths and limitations (5).

The WHO Commission on Social Determinants of Health has identified poor health literacy as a likely contributor to health inequities between social groups (6) and health literacy has repeatedly been shown to be associated with social determinants of health (7–9). At the same time, low health literacy can be considered a health risk factor independent of other social determinants of health, and many adverse health behaviours and health outcomes as well as inappropriate use of the health system have been associated with low health literacy (7, 10–13).

However, from a public health perspective, enhancing health literacy can also be seen as a means to facilitate the empowerment of citizens through the development of personal and collective knowledge and skills (14). Health literacy then becomes the enabler of promoting equitably distributed health and well-being for all, at all ages and in different contexts.

In 2013 health literacy was introduced in Health 2020: a European policy framework and strategy for the 21st century, in relation to efforts on health through the life course and people’s empowerment (15). Later, the document Priorities for health systems strengthening in the WHO European Region 2015–2020: walking the talk on people centredness also recommended investment in health literacy and empowerment (16). Furthermore, a European health literacy survey (HLS-EU) with more than 8000 respondents across eight Member States (7) identified inadequate or problematic health literacy in almost half of respondents, which was discussed in the report Health Literacy: The solid facts published in 2013 (4). In this publication, health literacy was identified as both a means and an outcome of health promotion, community empowerment and participation, and requiring a whole-of-society approach.

More recently, the Shanghai Declaration on promoting health in the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development (17) highlighted health literacy as a global pillar of health promotion and health equity. In the declaration, Member States committed themselves to prioritize the empowerment of their citizens by promoting health literacy and to:
• recognize health literacy as a critical determinant of health and invest in its development;

• develop, implement and monitor intersectoral national and local strategies for strengthening health literacy in all populations and in all educational settings;

• increase citizens’ control of their own health and its determinants, through harnessing the potential of digital technology;

• ensure that consumer environments support healthy choices through pricing policies, transparent information and clear labeling (17).

This special issue of Public Health Panorama explores and acknowledges the current progress that has been made in advancing health literacy across the WHO European Region. This attention to health literacy also reflects and upholds the Regional Office’s efforts, with dedicated support from the Member States, to develop a framework for a coherent health literacy approach in the European Region. Building on ongoing health-literacy-oriented regional activities and emerging interest among WHO Member States for expanding and/or strengthening health literacy nationally and in the Region, this European health literacy initiative promotes a common vision and lays the groundwork for synergetic implementation. By providing guidance on the practical means of promoting health literacy, this initiative aims to strengthen leverage for Member States and the WHO Region as it aims to promote healthy behaviours and ensure health equity.

To this end, in this issue, researchers, practitioners and decision-makers report on their advancements and reflections on health literacy and health literacy responsiveness at different levels of society. It is crucial, that we keep up the pace and continue to explore public health action from a health literacy perspective. Acknowledging people for what they are able to do contrary to what they carry with them in terms of personal, social and cultural challenges not only appears to be a potential key strategy in improving equitable distribution of health and well-being, but may also reduce the stigmatization related to the experience of social exclusion. We cannot afford to leave anyone behind.

REFERENCES


1 All references were accessed 7 August 2019.


