Interview with Marta Temido, Minister of Health, Portugal

Please explain to us why the creation of a health literacy program is so important.

The Portuguese Health Literacy Action Plan focuses on people-centred interventions to increase health literacy levels among the Portuguese population in a sustainable way, enhancing the ability of people to navigate the National Health Service within the context of their everyday life while improving self-care and disease management. This has become increasingly important for Portugal and other nations because the changing epidemiological and demographic paradigm, which is characterized by a high burden of non-communicable diseases and multimorbidity along with an ageing population, calls for a different approach to health promotion and disease prevention. Governments, health authorities and citizens now share the responsibility for promoting health and for assuring that each person can reach their full potential, which includes having the knowledge and the power to make informed decisions about health and healthy behaviour.

Our Health Literacy Program aims to provide the tools and the skills that people need to make informed health choices. It is expected that at some point in time, all of us will have to find health or health-related information, including information on health services. So besides being able to find it, it is essential that one can understand that information, critically appraise it and effectively use it to decide about a specific health problem, issue or medical course of action.

Please discuss some of the challenges you have faced in developing your nationwide health literacy plan.

Health literacy can be a challenging theoretical concept. When stepping down from the concept or theory to something operational as a health program, several issues arise, as is the case with a health literacy program.

In the case of the Portuguese experience, one of the most important challenges was to shift the orientation of the national health service to a more citizen focused approach, putting the citizen at the centre of the program.

Another challenge was to bring together and to harmonize the views and perspectives of the different stakeholders: managers, health professionals, patients and the community.

Additionally, it must be kept in mind, while designing this type of program, that there are different levels of health literacy: such as people having different levels of digital literacy, different access to digital media, different reading and interpreting skills, and different access to health care services. Everyone is different, so treating everyone the same way might increase the risk of health inequalities. While there are people that can effectively use health information, some (vulnerable populations, the elderly and others) still need support and further empowerment. Understanding this is important to avoid inequalities. Creating a health literacy
program that includes everyone and leaves no one behind and that contributes to reducing inequalities was quite challenging but, at the same, a comprehensive and enthusiastic enterprise.

**How will the program’s success be measured; how will you know when your goals have been achieved?**

The success of the Health Literacy Program will be assessed by its technical and social impact. In the first case, we are using Health Impact Assessment methodology and working with a European Consortium to develop and apply the Health Literacy Survey 2019. The results of this survey will allow us to compare where we are now with where we were in 2014 before the plan. We hope to have a “before and after” assessment of the plan.

From a social perspective, the success of the program will eventually be reflected in an increasingly healthy population or in the growing number of people making healthier choices and using health services and other health resources more effectively. For instance, we will know that the health literacy program is a success for every parent that is able to manage their child’s health problems with reduced anxiety by using all resources available in the National Health Service, according to their children’s and their own needs. Additionally, each healthy year gained, free from disease, disability or ill-health, will be the result of high health literacy.

**What has the public’s reaction been to the health literacy plan?**

In Portugal, investing in health literacy has been a popular idea. People in general recognize that they need more information and knowledge to address health issues and to effectively navigate through the National Health Service system. In addition, they are also starting to recognize that they have power over their health and over the health services and that they should be the centre of care and of the health system. As such, the health literacy program has been well received by the public in general. Patient associations also welcomed the program and recognized its relevance towards a more informed society where patients and health professionals are able to communicate more effectively for better treatment outcomes. Nevertheless, we should remain vigilant and assure that inequalities are addressed and that no one is left behind, even if they do not have adequate digital skills.

**How does Portugal’s health literacy plan fit and work with the WHO European Region’s goals for health literacy?**

The longstanding work on health literacy in Portugal has been recognized by WHO and is the main reason why Portugal is one of the leaders of the new network of the World Health Organization, the WHO European Region Action Network on Health Literacy for Implementation of Prevention and Control of NCDs.

The Portuguese Health Literacy Action Plan places the person at the centre of care and of health services delivery. The plan also works at improving health literacy among the Portuguese population in a sustainable way. This plan adopts a life-cycle approach and frames its implementation by setting it in context the strategic objectives of the National Health Plan. The National Health Plan is in line with the WHO Europe’s Health Literacy goals.

Experiences like the SNS + Proximidade, an innovative network that hosted, among others, the National Program for Health Literacy and Care Integration and the Digital Health Literacy, have made a significant contribution to the relevant role of Portugal in pursuing the WHO Europe’s goals for health literacy.

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