1. Could you explain to us why creating a health literacy programme is so important?

Learning about and improving health literacy is a priority issue for health promotion, and it requires urgent attention. The available evidence suggests that a person’s health literacy helps them make decisions both towards better general health and in the prevention and treatment of illnesses. Improving health literacy increases the likelihood that a person will decide to lead a healthy lifestyle, use preventive health-care services and adhere to treatment. It also helps to reduce the number of chronic diseases and improve the health and quality of life of the population.

Health literacy is related to general literacy and includes the ability to find, understand, critically evaluate and use health information through the life course. However, health literacy does not depend on the individual alone.

In a health system, health literacy interventions include providing simple, understandable and reliable information. Even simply by making medical centres easy to navigate with the use of clear and understandable signs, and improving communication between health professionals and their patients for example, can lead to significant improvements.

The socioeconomic conditions in which people live, work and study also affect health literacy. Thus, health literacy interventions are not associated exclusively with the health sector and require various forms of intersectoral collaboration among multiple stakeholders.

These abovementioned measures that are being taken to improve health literacy are carried out through the creation of a unified preventive environment based on the interagency cooperation of all government branches, sectors, societies (including health-care societies), ministries, agencies and services, employers, the media, public and religious organizations, volunteers and various population groups.

The availability of quality, reliable information in the media and on the internet is also necessary. In 2018 we launched the “You Are Stronger” information and communication campaign to promote a healthy lifestyle among the Russian population.

The campaign was held throughout the Russian Federation. All the main channels of communication were used: federal television, radio, billboards and the internet. The campaign focused on four target areas for improving public health: reducing alcohol consumption; reducing tobacco consumption; responsible nutrition; and responsible reproductive health. The campaign has continued into 2019 and will be extended to 2024 as part of the Federal Project entitled “Strengthening Public Health”.

2. Could you tell us if you experienced any difficulties in the development and implementation of health literacy interventions?
Despite the fact that health literacy is a relatively new concept for Russia and a number of other countries around the world, health literacy interventions, in terms of having a system to enlighten and educate people on health matters, have existed since Soviet times. Nikolai Semashko founded such a system, with the main principles being centralization; universal access to health care; special attention to motherhood and childhood; the combination of treatment with adequate preventive measures; the elimination of social factors in the occurrence of disease; and public involvement in health care. A great amount of attention was paid to educating the population on sanitary and hygiene issues, as this was one of the most effective ways of preventing diseases and creating the conditions for leading a healthy lifestyle. These principles formed the basis of the state policy and public health care of the time.

Today, on the one hand, people are encouraged to lead a healthy lifestyle, but on the other hand, we live in a society where harmful habits are being actively promoted. It is becoming increasingly difficult to navigate through these conflicting arrays of information, as people often do not have the necessary skills to search for, understand, critically evaluate and use information that is essential to improve or maintain their own health, and the health of their loved ones.

It was important for us to adapt the widely accepted term ‘health literacy’ to fit the Russian language. The difficulty lay in the fact that there are over eight different interpretations of the term (for example, medical or sanitary literacy etc.) But by taking international experience and contemporary approaches to health literacy into account, we eliminated this confusion and selected the most appropriate Russian term.

3. How will you measure the success of these interventions? How will you know when you have achieved your goals?

One of the main advantages of health literacy is that you can measure it and track the changes. Reliable measurement tools are now available that make it possible to identify which population groups need health literacy interventions.

We support the initiative of the WHO Regional Office to measure and monitor health literacy in the European Region on a regular basis, which is planned as part of the Action Network on Measuring Population and Organizational Health Literacy. The Russian Federation is participating in the Network and is preparing to launch a pilot population-based study to measure health literacy this year. By regularly measuring and evaluating health literacy, we can manage the situation and improve it effectively. What is more, it may become an instrument for measuring the effectiveness of the information and communication campaigns that we run.

4. How do health literacy interventions in the Russian Federation accord with the objectives of the European Union’s health literacy strategy?

The health literacy interventions are being developed in accordance with the Global Action Plan for the Prevention and Control of Noncommunicable Diseases 2013–2020, the Action Plan for the Prevention and Control of Noncommunicable Diseases in the WHO European Region 2016–2025, the European Health 2020 policy, and the United Nations 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. All these documents emphasize the need to ensure a healthy lifestyle and reduce mortality from noncommunicable diseases using modern approaches to improve the health literacy of the population.

We fully support WHO’s initiatives to measure and improve health literacy, as we believe that such measures are an important tool in expanding the opportunities to promote health and equity.

We also believe it is very important to create a pool of successful and effective practices for improving health literacy among various groups of the population. This development is being carried out as part of the WHO European Action Network on Health Literacy for the Prevention and Control of Noncommunicable Diseases, which is co-chaired by Portugal and the Russian Federation, in order to implement national pilot projects on health literacy.

All of this, without a doubt, forms the basis for applying contemporary approaches to measuring and improving health literacy as an important determinant of health, and demonstrates the potential of using health literacy in clinical practice, public health activities and policies.

Disclaimer: The interviewee alone is responsible for the views expressed in this publication and they do not necessarily represent the decisions or policies of the World Health Organization.