Side event on health literacy in the context of behavioural and cultural insights

Co-hosted by Austria, Portugal and the Russian Federation

Thursday, 16 September 2021, 11:00–12:30 CEST (virtual)

Background

Setting the scene

1. Health literacy – which is recognized as an important determinant of health and health equity and as being critical for implementing the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development – can affect the outcomes of health-related programmes and interventions.

2. There continue to be significant gaps in health literacy – a concept that may be defined as the knowledge, motivation and capacity of an individual to access, understand, appraise and apply health information. Conducted in 2011, the European Health Literacy Survey (HLS-EU) found that nearly half of all adults in eight European countries had limited health literacy skills (meaning having considerable difficulties in accessing, understanding, appraising and/or applying health information), and that health literacy levels differed substantially both across and within countries. This survey confirmed that the distribution of health literacy is socially skewed and that inadequate health literacy has the potential to adversely affect health outcomes.

3. The COVID-19 pandemic has challenged people’s capacity to quickly assimilate and apply new, fast-changing information and recommendations on preventive and protective behaviours. In a context marked by complex, varying and sometimes contradictory or even false information (the so-called infodemic), WHO-supported behavioural insights surveys in several countries have demonstrated that health literacy is often a predictor of health behaviours, perceptions and trust. This highlights the critical role of health literacy within the broader response to a public health emergency.

1 See https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC4668324/.
Call for action

4. Since 2018, Member States have been calling for the strengthening of efforts related to health literacy. In September 2019, a resolution entitled “Towards the implementation of health literacy initiatives through the life course” (EUR/RC69/R9) was adopted at the 69th session of the WHO Regional Committee for Europe (RC69), together with a supporting document, the Draft WHO European roadmap for implementation of health literacy initiatives through the life course.

5. The Health Evidence Network synthesis report 57 (2018) indicates that 19 Member States in the WHO European Region are either in the process of developing, or have developed, policies to address health literacy. Additionally, institutions, networks and consortiums working on the health literacy agenda are to be found in many Member States.

6. The WHO Action Network on Measuring Population and Organizational Health Literacy (M-POHL) was launched in 2018 with a view to enhancing countries’ efforts to measure and improve health literacy. During 2019–2021, the Network conducted a new cross-country comparative survey called the Health Literacy Survey 2019 (HLS19) based on the earlier HLS-EU survey, the aim being to enable benchmarking and provide recommendations for evidence-informed health policies. The results of the HLS19 survey are expected to be published later in 2021.

7. In early 2019, the WHO European Action Network on Health Literacy for Prevention and Control of Noncommunicable Diseases was created in order to build up an expert community of practice and involve the participating Member States in efforts to promote health literacy and accelerate the implementation of health literacy initiatives with a view to combating noncommunicable diseases. The WHO Regional Office for Europe (WHO/Europe) also advocates a whole-school approach whereby the school environment contributes to the promotion of health literacy.

Health literacy in the context of behavioural and cultural insights

8. Following the adoption of the European Programme of Work, 2020–2025 (EPW) at RC70 in September 2020, health literacy was recognized as a component within the flagship initiative on Healthier behaviours: incorporating behavioural and cultural insights – one of just four flagship initiatives under the EPW. This initiative seeks to foster a nuanced and comprehensive approach to health behaviours and the use of health services and medicines, in which health literacy is prioritized alongside broader behavioural and cultural determinants of health.

Objectives of the side event

9. Member States have requested an update on the action taken by WHO/Europe to implement resolution EUR/RC69/R9 (Towards the implementation of health literacy initiatives through the life course) in the context of the EPW and its flagship initiative on behavioural and cultural insights.

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10. This side event will provide information on initiatives related to health literacy within the context of behavioural and cultural insights undertaken both in Member States and by WHO/Europe. The event will explore the status of health literacy among the general population in the European Region, shedding light on challenging areas in which action is required, on the measures taken by Member States and on the way forward.

11. The objectives of the side event are to:

• introduce the EPW flagship initiative on behavioural and cultural insights, focusing on the role of health literacy vis-à-vis other determinants of healthy practices;

• raise awareness of how health literacy can be measured and how this can be used to inform action by presenting a range of country case examples and lessons learned and by inviting participants to discuss their experiences; and

• advocate a broader approach to behavioural and cultural insights and invite Member States to engage in a process to develop a regional strategic framework on behavioural and cultural insights, including health literacy perspectives, to be submitted to the Regional Committee for discussion at a dedicated event during its 72nd session in 2022.

Session outline

12. The side event will take place online. It will include an introduction to the flagship initiative on behavioural and cultural insights being undertaken by WHO/Europe, country experiences and lessons learned, participant surveys and a moderated plenary discussion involving Member States, WHO technical staff and partners, with the aim of generating a high level of engagement and interaction.

13. The programme for this side event will be made available on WHO/Europe’s website, on the web page for RC71.