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Health Literacy and Medication Practices in Senior Housing Residents

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Objective

To conduct a descriptive analysis of health literacy, knowledge of prescribed medications, and methods of administering medications in a cohort of senior housing residents.

Methods

- Those who agreed to participate were interviewed at 5 Cathedral Square living facilities surrounding Burlington, Vermont.
- Participants were asked to bring all of their prescription medications to the interview.
- Participants completed the 7-minute STOFHLA to assess health literacy, during which the student interviewer cataloged the subject’s prescriptions on a Medication Passport.

Results

- 21 individuals participated; 3 were removed from data analysis due to difficulties verifying their medication data.
- The mean STOFHLA score = 22.6, or marginal health literacy.
- As determined by STOFHLA score:
  -11 subjects (61%) had adequate health literacy (23-36 points)
  -1 subject (6%) had marginal health literacy (17-22 points)
  -6 subjects (33%) had inadequate literacy (0-16 points)

Conclusions

- On average, the senior housing residents in our study each take 9 prescription medications.
- Nearly 40% of these individuals may lack sufficient health literacy to navigate the healthcare system.

Demographics

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>inadequate/marginal health literacy</th>
<th>adequate health literacy</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>n (% of sampled)</td>
<td>7 (38.9%)</td>
<td>11 (61.1%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>average age (SD)</td>
<td>76.9 (12.2)</td>
<td>67.6 (13.2)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>average education</td>
<td>high school diploma</td>
<td>high school diploma</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>avg. # of meds (SD)</td>
<td>9.0 (7.9)</td>
<td>9.0 (5.3)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>male : female</td>
<td>1:6</td>
<td>1:10</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Background

- It is predicted that 90 million adults in the United States have trouble understanding and acting on health care information, including instructions for prescription medications 1.
- Low level of literacy is a known contributor to medication errors and adverse drug events 2.
- The Short Test of Functional Health Literacy in Adults (STOFHLA) is a “functional literacy assessment tool designed to evaluate adult literacy in the health care setting”. It measures "functional literacy on the assumption that more than classroom reading ability is necessary to understand and negotiate the health care system adequately” 3.
- Cathedral Square Corporation provides housing, services, and long term care needs to seniors and individuals with special needs 4.

Future Directions

- Conduct a larger study to evaluate the relationship between health literacy and adverse drug events.
- 50% of all participants in our study are at risk for moderate or major drug interactions amongst their prescription medications. Future studies may ascertain if those with lower levels of health literacy are more at risk of suffering adverse drug interactions.
- Identify specific interventions that may increase an individual’s health literacy level and develop methods for implementing these strategies.

Lessons Learned

- The small text on the FAHC Medications Passport may prove difficult for seniors with vision problems.
- Well-orchestrated and well-executed project results from the cumulative efforts of attentive faculty, invested community partners, and engaged students.
- Persistence is key in finding participants.
- Be flexible regarding issues that arise during field work that may necessitate changing the way the project is executed.
- Working with the community and getting to know the individuals that live in it was a rewarding part of this public health project.

References


STOFHLA

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For the purposes of analyzing, the inadequate health literacy and marginal health literacy groups were combined.