

Chapter 14 Health Literacy in Rural Communities: Challenges and Champions

D. Gillis and S. Sears

Key Points

- Health literacy is a pressing population health concern with relevance to those living in rural Canada.
- A participatory research process exploring the links between literacy and health through the lived experiences of people with low literacy helped to build capacity for meaningful change in practices and policies in one health district in rural Nova Scotia.
- By sharing their knowledge and perspectives, community members, practitioners, managers, and policy makers from the fields of health and literacy developed a shared understanding of the emerging concept of health literacy, identified priorities for action to reduce the impact of low literacy on health, and championed system-wide change to improve health literacy.

Literacy has long been considered a necessary resource for everyday living and for achieving one's aspirations in life. In addressing the daunting challenges facing rural Atlantic Canadians in the 1930s and 1940s, social justice champion Dr. Moses Coady considered literacy fundamental to "a full and abundant life for everyone in the community." Despite this fundamental premise, literacy is not at the forefront of Canadian public policy. Indeed, policy analyst Judith Maxwell has recently referred to low literacy as Canada's "hidden deficit" (Maxwell and Teplova 2005).

Although low literacy is often referred to as one of many barriers faced by people living in rural communities, little attention has been directed to the impact of literacy on health. Over the past two decades, growing evidence of direct and indirect effects of literacy on health has positioned literacy as an important determinant of health in Canada (Ronson and Rootman 2008). Recently, the concept of health literacy has captured the attention of researchers, policy makers, and practitioners. Drawing from our experience in addressing the links between literacy and health in rural Nova Scotia, we focus on the implications for health literacy policy and practice in a rural Canadian context. In this chapter, we describe a community-university participatory research project, key findings from this collaborative research, and the system-wide response to a call for action. We begin by examining health literacy – an evolving concept of increasing policy and practice relevance in Canada.

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