

A Norwegian Strategy to increase Health Literacy in the Population – English summary

On the 9th of May 2019 the Minister of Health launched a Norwegian strategy to increase health literacy in the population.

There has been a slowly growing but not widespread awareness of the English concept "health literacy" and its considerable importance in developing patient-centered health care services, but we have lacked a good and generally accepted Norwegian name for this phenomenon. Without such a name systematic work and increased emphasis on health literacy will be very difficult to achieve. The most important element of the strategy is therefore to establish an official Norwegian name for health literacy that would be generally accepted. In the process of finding a name we consulted institutions working on health literacy and the Language Council of Norway, ending up with the name "health competence".

Health literacy is the degree to which individuals can find, understand, and process health information to make health decisions that respond to their needs. In other words it is about empowerment of people and patients. Another aspect of health literacy is the health care systems responsiveness to health literacy, that is the health care services capability to incorporate health literacy thinking in organisation, management and services. Our Health Minister's main goal is to create the patient's health care system. This is impossible to achieve unless the patients have or are given a sufficient level of health literacy. A strategy for increased health literacy is for that reason highly welcome.

The strategy has been made over a short time period with rather limited, but some important external processes:

- Institutions known to do health literacy relevant research were invited to a meeting in the Ministry to present their work. This has resulted in the formation of a health literacy research network.
- There was a meeting with the Language Council of Norway to find a Norwegian name for health literacy.
- The Norwegian Association of Local and Regional Authorities (KS), The Regional Health Authorities, the Norwegian Directorate of Health, the Norwegian Public Health Institute and the Norwegian Medical Association were asked to report on known, ongoing activities with relevance to health literacy. This informal mapping revealed a lot of activities with clear relevance to health literacy, without that concept necessarily being used.
- The outline of the strategy was presented to user organisations and their opinions were welcomed and taken into consideration before the strategy was finished.

Apart from establishing a Norwegian name, the main strategic activities to increase health literacy are:

- Performing a survey to measure the level of health literacy in the population and some subpopulations as part of the WHO-European health literacy survey 19 (HLS-19)
- Ongoing activities with relevance to health literacy should be followed up, evaluated and further developed
- Knowledge of and skills in health literacy must be incorporated in the education of health personnel
- The health care services must adjust their communication with patients to the patients level of health literacy
- The perspective of health literacy must be an integrated part of all health care services
- The patient and user organisations' work to increase health literacy must be appreciated and stimulated

- Digital tools must be used to make relevant information related to health literacy available
- A forthcoming white paper on specialised health care will discuss work on health literacy in these services