

## **Health Literacy: the New Global Health Solution?**

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Somewhere between a Google search for hemp undies and reading the food label on the trans-fat free Baked Frito-Lays, we are perpetually confronted with an abundance of information designed to calculate our every move if we are to live greener and healthier. Are our daily actions making a statement or an actual difference to ourselves and the world around us? Or do we have the ability to make sound decisions based on critical skills needed to take responsibility for individual and social health? Are we health-literate enough to know any better?

According to the BC Health Literacy Research Team, Health Literacy is ‘an individual’s ability to access, understand, evaluate, and communicate basic health information to promote and maintain good health’. The recent 2007 Canadian Council on Learning report entitled Health Literacy in Canada states approximately 60% of Canadians (ages 16 and older) lack the capacity to obtain, understand and act upon health information and services to make appropriate health decisions on their own. In other words, over 60% of Canadians are health-illiterate. Researchers have argued that enhanced health literacy has a positive influence on an individual’s empowerment, intentions to act, and overall health status. Health literacy could very well be the next sustainable global health solution.

On February 12, 2008 Lt-Gov. Steven Point delivered Victoria’s throne speech to B.C. focusing on climate change and health stressing personal responsibility as part of the province’s new strategy. In an age of oversaturation in the media, societal messages can be overwhelming. Daily, we are reminded of the mess we have made of Mother Earth and are inundated with directives to “go green”. How do we make environmentally conscious, healthy, sustainable decisions? If we do not have the ability to sift through the mounds (the size of most landfill sites) of inaccurate health and environmental messages; how do we make long-term sustainable change? Even though growing attention has been placed on the environment and the impact on human health, there is an important component if the goal is to achieve a sustainable, healthier future. Could the planet be a healthier place if you and I turned our attention from Nature to Human Nature and enhanced our own “health literacy”?

Striking a balance among all the dimensions of health: physical, emotional, social, spiritual, occupational, intellectual, and environmental, is a delicate task. It appears as though society has jumped on the latest bandwagon and the pendulum is currently stuck on the environmental component. It is not a question of whether fouling our nest is more detrimental than fouling our body, but rather that they are inextricably linked. Individuals require health-related knowledge, skills, values, and attitudes to promote and maintain good health in all dimensions. If all it takes is a spiffed up Al Gore and Leo DiCaprio driving around in a Hybrid to get a following, I strongly suggest that our BC Health Literacy Research Team sign up for a makeover and we get a new set of wheels.

Regardless of the theme, health-literate individuals can transfer their knowledge and skills into daily situations...the key is empowerment. Health-literate individuals do not wait around or blame the government, and wait again until they impose legislation on the issue. Rather, they can decipher from brands of consumerism for a healthier lifestyle. For some, health-literate individuals are making informed environmentally conscious decisions, in contrast to others who are guided by unsustainable, short-term enviro-fads. For many this following has led to enviro-confusion, enviro-exhaustion, and enviro-mayhem. Keep the air conditioning off until the bedroom hits 90 degrees and experience heatstroke. Bike 20 kms to work each day in heavy traffic to save the ozone. Remodel your house with expensive 'green gadgets'. Cloth versus disposable diapers. Plastic baby bottles leaching bisphenol A. Buy carbon credits to reduce carbon footprint. Health literacy enables an individual to access, comprehend, evaluate, and communicate basic health information in order to make informed decisions and responsible life choices.

The global message of empowerment should resonate with both young and old members of society: to put our best green foot forward, leave a healthy footprint; enhance health literacy as the new global health solution.

A CIHR International School Health Literacy Symposium, hosted by our BC Health Literacy Research Team is being held in Vancouver in March 12-14. It is a forum for leading international researchers and practitioners from around the globe to discuss future projects and initiatives in the emerging field.

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