

BOOK REVIEW

International handbook of health literacy

Sylvia Duncan



As the title suggests, the *International Handbook of Health Literacy* is an exhaustive text serving both as an educational read for health professionals and as a road map for anyone engaging in health literacy research.¹ Health literacy is essentially about citizens' ability to access, understand, and use information about health care. Beginning its journey with the origins of the term "health literacy" in the 1973 Conference on Health Education in upstate New York, the *Handbook* explores current research, targeted interven-

tions, policy programmes, and predictions for the future written by an international consortium of experts.

The first section encompasses the current state of the health literacy field, reviewing terminology frequently used by researchers. It also captures a snapshot of health literacy in different communities, such as in older people, people living with chronic conditions, and in other marginalised populations. Section two of the *Handbook* audits a selection of community interventions aimed at increasing health literacy in various populations, providing the reader with digestible examples of both the concept of health literacy and the potential efficacy of such programmes. Children's health literacy is given particular attention here, theorising that including children in their own health-care decisions will develop their health literacy in a safe space, with supportive clinicians and parents acting as a safety net to guide the child towards good health choices.

Section three broadens its scope to population level, discussing various nations' approach to health literacy. Case studies of Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) nations, such as Canada, Scotland, and Finland, and their national health literacy strategies highlight the potential benefits to the populace and advises of known pitfalls to be avoided. A chapter centred on the health literacy of New Zealand's Māori population outlines several contexts in which Māori health outcomes are worsened by poor health literacy. Particularly eye-opening was a discussion of the Ministry of Health's "A Framework for Health Literacy",² a 2015 publication that identifies steps the Ministry can take towards building a health-literate public and a health system that communicates better to those lower levels of health literacy. This may provide some impetus for further research into the challenges New Zealand faces in promoting health literacy to its increasingly diverse population. Section four looks to the future, exploring how research in this area can be improved by promoting more participatory research and by acknowledging the

interconnectedness of health literacy and other factors that reduce health care participation.

The *handbook* also discusses the concept of mental health literacy at length. This section is of acute importance to today's students, who are more aware of mental health-care and issues than the generations before them. A chapter by Anthony F. Jorm, a Melbourne University Professor renowned for his work in population-level mental health action, argues that much of the general population is developing knowledge about mental health disorders and effective self-help strategies for milder issues. However, Jorm argues that population mental health literacy can be improved and that any shortcoming could have significant effects in a crisis. Lack of mental health literacy may contribute to often large delays between onset of a mental illness and recognition of an issue. Furthermore, a deficiency of mental health first aid skills may lead to ineffective peer interventions in crucial moments.

The *Handbook* serves as a reminder to us as burgeoning medical practitioners that people who walk through a clinic door are not "empty vessels", ready and thirsty to be filled with knowledge provided by us as experts. Rather, patients come with their own pre-existing notions and ideas of their condition, potential investigations or treatments – an understanding that may be difficult to alter in a 15 minute consultation. Building health literacy from a young age that encompasses all areas of hauora is essential for developing a robust population – the *Handbook* provides some direction for medical practitioners and community organisations to aid the wider population in developing better health literacy. The *Handbook* also practices what it preaches by providing, alongside its print copies for purchase, a free and fully searchable eBook for download from OAPEN (open access academic books at oapen.org) as a further contribution to reducing inequity in health. Although its hefty nature may scare students, *International Handbook of Health Literacy* is an informative read for any student interested in advocating for better health understanding, and therefore better health outcomes, for New Zealanders.

References

1. Okan O, Bauer U, Pinheiro P, Sorensen K, Levin D. (2019). International handbook of health literacy: research, practice and policy across the life-span. Available from: <http://www.oapen.org/search?identifier=1005225>
2. Ministry of Health. 2015. A Framework for Health Literacy [Internet]. Wellington: Ministry of Health [cited 2019 Oct 3]. Available from: <https://www.health.govt.nz/publication/framework-health-literacy>

About the author

› Sylvia is a Trainee Intern at Dunedin School of Medicine, interested in how we as developing clinicians can prepare ourselves for our future careers. When not scouring the web for obscure e-books to read and review, she enjoys exploring the Dunedin sunshine when it shows itself.

Correspondence

Sylvia Duncan: dunsy878@student.otago.ac.nz