

# Health Literacy in Canada; a Primer for Students: Laurie Hoffman-Goetz, Lorie Donelle, and Rukhsana Ahmed

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My first and most important message is to get this book and devour it. It was a joy for me to read, and I only hope my review captures all that I learned from it! It is highly readable with very helpful tables and charts, useful thought questions to make sure the reader is understanding, and an outstanding structure.

I began my reading by thinking I know a bit about this subject and its importance, but with each chapter, I became more and more convinced that health literacy is a key to approaching issues of health inequity, the social determinants of illness, compliance, shared decision making, cross cultural issues, and other difficult to change topics in health and healthcare. Approaching health literacy may give a manageable and effective way in to these topics.

Two things from the title deserve comment. The “In Canada” part is important because Canada has the most well-reasoned, systematic, and long-standing strategies and data in this arena. We all can and should learn from Canada! The second misnomer I feel is the designation “A Primer.” This text is the most comprehensive, readable, and useful writing on this topic that I have ever seen. The “primer” educated me enormously.

I love the organization. The forward is an elegantly constructed road map for the book by Dr Irving Rootman. His own passion for the subject, contributions, and pride in the authors work comes through “loud and clear.”

Each chapter begins with a memorable quote, specifically articulated learning objects and opening paragraph framing the chapter and a closing synopsis. In between, the objectives

are clearly discussed and illustrated in the sequence they were laid out at the beginning. There are stopping points with highlighted reflective questions to make sure the reader understands. Each chapter ends with a few key references with a more complete bibliography included at the end of the book.

Chapters include the following: Why a Book on Health Literacy from a Canadian Perspective?; A Definition of Health Literacy; Population Measures of Literacy and Health Literacy; Health literacy and Social Determinants of Health; Culture and Health Literacy; Information Technology and Health Literacy; Mass Media and Health Literacy; Risk Communication and Health Literacy; Health Literacy in the Clinical Context; and Health Literacy Interventions in Canada. The chapters are full of clear definitions, useful measurement tools, logical discussions of health literacy, and the impact of addressing it as a social determinant or across culture or in the clinic. The most exciting chapters were on the new world of eLiteracy and all the implications this will have for great care.

Here are some sobering statistics: ninety million people in the US find it difficult to understand and correctly utilize health information! Sixty percent of adults in Canada do not possess a level of health literacy adequate to manage their own health and healthcare needs! The implications of this data are sobering! More attention to this topic which is only superficially taught in most health professions schools or significantly underappreciated at most frontline healthcare venues could yield huge benefits in reaching the Institute for Healthcare Improvement's Triple Aim of improving health, improving healthcare, and lowering costs.

As I read and learned from the book, I had an idea for the AACE, EACE, and CPEN organizations. Each year, the town I live in selects one book for everybody to read. They then discuss it in groups, learn from each other, and appreciate the book even more than reading it solo. I propose that the publishers distribute this book at a manageable cost to interested

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members of these three organizations, and then, we have webinars, e-discussion groups, and time at the annual meeting to discuss and apply what we learn from Canada and this “primer.” Together, we develop innovative strategies to improve health literacy in the cancer world. That focus *will* surely influence disparities, health equity, cultural understanding, and level the field a bit more on the topic of social determinants. We could really influence e-literacy as this topic explodes in our connected, device-oriented world, and we might even influence the mass media to be more helpful, careful, and accurate in this space.

Even if that idea cannot happen, perhaps, I can encourage you to devour this book. The journey of 1000 miles begins with first steps, and the vistas we see may be more a function of us having “new eyes.” This book will give you new eyes about the topic of health literacy.

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