

New approaches to health literacy – linking different perspectives

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Introduction

This new book extends the literature on health literacy by moving the discussion beyond its Anglo-Saxon, Western-centric origins. In so doing, the cultural aspects of health are elevated to a podium where true debate and exchange of ideas can take place.

The importance of health literacy

The Shanghai Declaration, which came out of the 9th Global Conference on Health Promotion (Shanghai 2016), identified health literacy as one of the core pillars required for achieving the Agenda for Sustainable Development by 2030. While professionals in the field of public health may agree on the importance of health literacy, there is no clear consensus on what this means. This may be in part due to the rapid developments in this field and the varied strands comprising the aspect of public health identified as health literacy. However, the authors create a strong argument for expanding the understanding of health literacy beyond a focus on the individual to embrace a systems perspective. They also promote moving away from a strictly biomedical approach to envisage a continuum of health and illness using the framework of salutogenesis.

The scope of the discourse

The book opens with a chapter on health disparities. An important thread explores the contribution of socio-economic factors to the healthy living agenda. Personal lifestyle choices have all too often been promoted in an attempt to encourage individuals to adopt health enhancing behaviours. Research findings challenge the importance of individual health seeking activity compared to socially constructed circumstances such as education, income, occupation and class. While the media has tended to push the neo-liberal agenda of individual responsibility for one's own and one's family's health, the authors argue for an understanding of health literacy based on equity and inclusivity together with access to life-long learning.

Health literacy in children and adolescents

The second chapter reviews what is understood about health literacy among children and adolescents. The concept of promoting health behaviours in school age children is nothing new as this was first introduced in the USA in the 1970s as part of the public school curriculum. However, the subject seems to have fallen off the radar with little concrete investigation into the topic until the 21st century. Although research into child and adolescent health literacy is expanding, findings of existing research indicate that child



health literacy has a strong correlation to the health literacy of children's parents and is strongly related to social, economic and cultural factors.

Book review

Communication and health promotion

Further chapters explore the role of communication and the significance of health promotion in increasing health literacy. Examples of the fight against infectious disease, decision-making regarding participation in cancer screening and asthma management in individuals are used as case studies to illustrate different levels of health literacy from a societal approach to an individual's decisions about how they manage chronic health conditions.

Discussions then move forward to explore the concept of salutogenesis as an alternative to a strictly biomedical approach to health literacy, to discuss complex interventions in childcare settings to create healthier childhoods and to explore ways of recognizing children's capacity to create meaning around health topics rather than just imparting information to them.

Mental health literacy

Mental health literacy is examined, and questions posed about whether new concepts are required which recognize the unique nature of mental well-being. Cultural contributions are explored in chapters on German school children, Turkish migrants in Germany and reflective comparisons of health literacy in Europe and in Columbia. A further chapter on health literacy in Afghanistan provides unexpected insights and raises questions about how health literacy is measured. The book ends predictably with a look at future perspectives and questions about whether health literacy is or is not a key concept in developing a healthy lifestyle. The authors suggest that health literacy, due to its societal significance, must be considered more systemically and comprehensively within a social agency and political framework.

Conclusion

When I state that the book ends predictably, this is not a criticism. The final chapters satisfy the reader's expectation for the tying up of loose ends and answers for questions about where we go from here. The book is very well-written, well-supported by reference to the relevant research literature and is both academic and highly engaging. *New Approaches to Health Literacy: Linking Different Perspectives* should be on the book shelf of every health professional concerned with health promotion, public health and the creation of healthy societies.

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