

4.7 A Quick, Low-prep Health Literacy Intervention: The 2010-2011 Northern Virginia Health Literacy Initiative (NVHLI)

This ESOL initiative was one component of the NVHLI,¹ a community health literacy outreach effort of the Inova Health System's Inova Fairfax Hospital Health Sciences Library, funded through the National Network of Libraries of Medicine. The ESOL initiative brought together ESOL, social work, and library science approaches to improving health literacy among historically hard-to-reach LEP populations in the region. The library teamed with two county adult ESOL programs, a local literacy council, and a non-profit organization that supports immigrants and refugees. A hospital social worker with extensive ESOL teaching experience presented two-and-a-half-hour interactive health literacy presentations to beginning and intermediate level ESOL classes at these programs, with the goals of filling in learner knowledge gaps on accessing affordable health care in the region and informing learners of online multilingual health education resources. Presentations utilized the stories "Emergency!" and "A Doctor's Appointment" from [Picture Stories for Adult ESL Health Literacy](#) by Kate Singleton. The decision was made to use these picture stories because they were designed to address multiple complex, highly relevant topics in one class session with maximum low-level learner participation and comfort. The two particular stories were selected to elicit information and perceptions learners already held on the following topics and to build upon that knowledge:

- The availability of affordable care clinics in the region
- A cost comparison of preventive vs. emergency care
- Options for paying large medical bills
- The U.S. culturally-preferred practice of preventive care
- Cultural perceptions of the patient and provider roles in different countries
- The legal right to a health care interpreter in the U.S.
- Downsides of using family members as interpreters in medical situations
- Rights and responsibilities of patients; responsibilities of health care providers
- Importance of asking questions at the doctor's

¹ Funded with federal funds from the National Library of Medicine, National Institutes of Health, and the Department of Health and Human Services with the University of Maryland Baltimore

- Advocating for oneself and family in health care
- Obtaining clear, accurate health information
- Medication safety

These topics were deemed important from ESOL, social work, library science, and health care provider perspectives in advance of the presentations.

As part of the presentations, learners received a printed list of affordable care clinics in the area, including women's health, pediatric, vision, dental, hearing, and mental health resources, as well as social service providers that support immigrant populations. The presenter went over different kinds of help each service offers and registration details. Learners frequently stated that they were previously unaware of the listed community resources. Learners also received an [ESOL Health Care Tip Sheet](#) and looked (when technology resources at sites allowed) at [MedlinePlus.gov](#) and [HealthyRoadsMedia.org](#) with the presenter.

Presentations reached 811 ESOL learners. Sessions were, as predicted, highly interactive. Learners eagerly offered input and asked questions, either during the whole group presentations or individually afterwards. While an intensive evaluation of the project was not in the project's purview, learner interviews were conducted three months after presentations. Learners reported the following outcomes:

- Accessing primary care for the first time in the U.S.
- Registering at local clinics
- Pursuing delayed surgery
- Adopting healthier behaviors
- Getting a physical for the first time
- Sharing the affordable care resource list with friends and family
- Sharing information on the right to an interpreter and handling large hospital bills with friends and family

Most learners interviewed expressed interest in the multilingual health information websites but had not looked at them independently due to lack of free time or lack of computer access.

Impact of the presentations could also be gleaned from student disclosures to the presenter at the ends of the sessions. As a health care social worker,

the presenter was able to refer the following learners to appropriate support services:

- A woman who shared that her entire family had been murdered in her native country, that she came to the U.S. to escape her memories, and that she was severely depressed
- A mother who shared that her teenage son was ordering “vitamins” from the Internet that made him develop muscles very fast; she was concerned because the son reported experiencing irregular heart rhythms for hours after taking the “vitamins” and working out
- A woman in her seventh month of pregnancy who asked if it would be important to tell her obstetrician that she takes thyroid medication
- A 76-year-old man who pulled from his wallet many appointment cards he had received when being discharged from a hospital on various admissions; he asked with frustration how he could go to aftercare appointments when he didn’t know how to apply for Medicare and no one would help him
- An elderly woman who had just joined her husband in the U.S. to find that he had been having tremors on one side of his body for months and had no health insurance or care

In addition to stories like these, there were many, many requests for referrals to dental and vision care and to gynecologists who would provide non-pregnancy-related care. Additionally, one uninsured ESOL instructor requested a referral for affordable care for a chronic condition.

The presenter also gave three-hour presentations to 100 ESOL teachers and tutors on teaching about U.S. health care. Teachers and tutors were very enthusiastic about the information and ideas they received, often stating that they knew that health care was of great interest and importance to their learners, but they hadn’t known where to start in planning lessons and simplifying the complexities of health care for their learners.

While having someone on hand who is both a health care social worker and an ESOL educator is somewhat unusual, this intervention nevertheless has the potential to be replicated in many ESOL settings where resources and time are scarce. The stories used are free and reproducible for appropriate classroom use. Brief yet far-reaching lesson plans are available on the website. Local hospitals, clinics, or public health departments might find it within their interest to provide a social worker or other appropriate health care provider to teach learners about services and suggest referrals for learners in crisis. Health science librarians might be available from a hospital or medical school library to demonstrate appropriate health information websites for low-level ESOL learners.

