The Group Health Plain Language Network:
A grassroots effort to build a plain language culture from the ground up

Authors: Rhonda Aronwald, BA, Sarah Greene, MPH, Erin Guin, BA, Kathryn Ramos, BA, Jessica Ridpath, BA, Diane Schultz, RPh, Robyn Shean, Kim Wicklund, MPH, Sheila Yates, MPH

Background
The Group Health Plain Language Network is a staff-driven initiative to advance health literacy at Group Health, a non-profit, consumer-governed health system providing care and coverage to more than 600,000 members in Washington and Idaho. Despite extremely limited resources, the Network has completed several projects to promote plain language across the organization and engaged dozens of individuals and departments in support of a plain language culture.

What is plain language?
Plain language is clear and concise, uses short sentences and common words, and is focused on the needs and attributes of the audience.

Why plain language?
Focusing our initiative on plain language frames the problem of low health literacy around the complexities of the health care system instead of the varying skill sets of our patients. It is a solution-oriented approach that cuts across disciplines, supports patient-centered care, improves patient safety, and has a strong business case in other industries.

Primary objectives
The Network’s overarching goal is to establish a commitment to clear communication—using plain language as a “universal precaution” in verbal, written, and web-based interactions with all patients. The following objectives support plain language as a communication standard across our organization:

- Get leadership buy-in for a plain language initiative
- Create a network of plain language champions
- Launch a strategic communication campaign to build awareness and buy-in
- Develop tools to support plain language
- Provide plain language training
- Revise print and web-based materials in plain language
- Involve patients when developing health education materials
- Evaluate the impact of our initiative

Why did we do it?
Plain language cuts across silos and engages all departments in support of a plain language culture. It also cuts across disciplines, supports the varying skill sets of our patients, and attributes of the audience. Plain language culture when resources are scarce?

Network of plain language champions — We started with 12 members in 2007 and have grown to >30 members from >20 departments. Network founders and other key members serve as a guiding coalition, which meets quarterly and sets goals annually. Most Network projects are carried out by ad hoc work groups. Individual Network members also initiate other plain language projects in their home departments.

Communication campaign — New resources are published in organization-wide broadcasts and targeted newsletters for subgroups of staff. Network members who work in communications write periodic stories about health literacy and plain language in various staff and member news channels. We also reach out to patients at key events for Group Health members.

Leadership buy-in — We secured executive-level support for a “Plain Language Charter,” establishing a leadership-endorsed plain language initiative. The charter ties plain language to existing organizational goals and shows cost savings and other benefits from plain language efforts outside health care. While it doesn’t allocate any new resources for the initiative, the charter gives the Network credibility, justifies time spent on Network activities, and begins to set an organizational expectation of clear communication with patients.

Implications

- Organizational change strategies can help jumpstart plain language culture change.
- Framing our work around a solution (plain language) rather than a problem (low health literacy) was a key step that boosted buy-in.
- Plain language is a strategy that clearly aligns with other organizational goals. It also cuts across silos and engages staff who may not otherwise feel linked to low health literacy.
- Despite new tools and training for staff, we saw a large increase in requests for plain language editing. Providing an editing resource is vital.
- Our multi-faceted approach has helped change our culture. But each segment of our work can also stand alone.

Key message
Even with no funding, frontline staff can work together to start building a plain language culture within a health system.

Plain language saves money and improves outcomes:
- Washington State: $35 million extra revenue w/ 95% fewer hotline calls
- Veterans Benefits Administration: Based on savings from 35% to 50% — $150 million savings plus $8 million per year

- Boosts productivity and increases employee satisfaction:
  - Improved Communications: Aided staff employees with streamlined public questions by phone to other OAs.
  - EMERC: 41% higher employee production, 27% increase in productivity and 77% decrease in errors

Tools — An online plain language toolkit for all staff includes:
- Rationale for using plain language
- Tips for verbal interactions, print materials, and medication instructions
- A list of 700+ patient-friendly words
- Plain language editing examples
- Tools for patients and links to other resources

Evaluate — Securing a grant or other support for outcomes measurement is a top priority in 2009. Available measures suggest increased comprehension and satisfaction with two revised letters: 1) 100% decrease in calls to clarify, 2) 99% satisfaction with content and readability.

Involve patients — Feedback gathered from patients at the annual Group Health membership meeting informed a direct result of our findings.

Training — A plain language refresher training was provided to health education writers and other staff; a customizable “train the trainer” module lets individual managers orient their staff to plain language principles; clinical leadership approved and began offering an online health literacy CME course developed by NODA and HSRA.

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Question:
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Answer:
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