AOTA’s Societal Statement on Health Literacy

Occupational therapy can promote health and contribute to the efforts to create a more health-literate society through the development and use of health education approaches and materials that are understandable, accessible, and usable by the full spectrum of consumers. Health literacy affects individuals’ ability to make health decisions and actively participate in health-related activities.

Earlier definitions of health literacy suggested that the concept was primarily related to the ability of individuals to gather, interpret, and use information to make suitable health-related decisions (Institute of Medicine, 2004). Recently, scholars have suggested that the definition of health literacy include individual ability, professional communication skills, and the context or environment in which the information is being disseminated (Pleasant et al., 2016). When all three aspects are considered, health literacy promotes participation, empowerment, and control over daily life (Nutbeam, 2008; Pleasant et al., 2016).

Persons with inadequate health literacy are more likely to experience adverse health outcomes (DeWalt, Berkman, Sheridan, Lohr, & Pignone, 2004). Although those who possess adequate health literacy achieve better health outcomes, an estimated 87 million U.S. adults have low health literacy, with higher rates among elderly people, minority populations, and individuals with low incomes or education levels (Kutner, Greenberg, Jin, & Paulsen, 2006). The 2010 National Action Plan to Improve Health Literacy has sought to actively engage people in an effort to create a more health literate society (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services [DHHS], 2010).

Occupational therapy practitioners can assist in ensuring that all health-related information and education provided to recipients of occupational therapy or other health-related services match that person’s literacy abilities; cultural sensitivities; and verbal, cognitive, and social skills. In line with the health communication and health information technology objectives found in Healthy People 2020 (DHHS, 2013), the American Occupational Therapy Association strives to ensure that occupational therapy practitioners have appropriate communication and education skills to help enable all people to gain access to and understand occupational therapy and other health-related services. This includes information and education that promote self-management for optimum health and participation. In addition, occupational therapy practitioners may facilitate clients’ health literacy by promoting systems of care or environments that adhere to health literacy principles and strategies.

References


Authors
Kris Pizur-Barnekow, PhD, OTR/L
Amy Darragh, PhD, OTR/L
Cheryl Miller, DrOT

for

The Representative Assembly Coordinating Committee (RACC):
Sara-Jane Crowley, Adv. Dip.OT, OTR/L, *Chairperson*
Winifred Schultz-Krohn, PhD, OTR/L, BCP, SWC, FAOTA
Steve Taff, PhD, OTR/L, FAOTA
Kathy Kannenberg, MA, OTR/L, CCM
Wayne Winistorfer, MPA, OTR
Debi Hinerfeld, MS, OTR/L, RA Speaker
Deborah Slater, MS, OT/L, FAOTA, *AOTA Staff Liaison*

Adopted by the Representative Assembly Coordinating Committee October 4, 2016