**Public-Private Collaborations to Promote Adult Literacy**

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**Functional literacy** is “the ability to read, write, & speak . . . & compute & solve problems at levels of proficiency necessary to function on the job & in society, to achieve one's goals, & develop one's knowledge & potential” (National Literacy Act of 1991).

**Health Literacy** is “the degree to which individuals have the capacity to obtain, process, & understand basic health information & services needed to make appropriate health decisions” (Healthy People 2010).

**Low Literacy patients** are not, & cannot be, informed consumers.

### RESEARCH FINDINGS EXEMPLIFYING HEALTH INEQUITIES RELATED TO LOW LITERACY:

**Mexican Immigrant Women's Understanding of Cervical Cancer Education**

#### HPV as Causal Factor
Few knew this link, though some had heard about a vaccine for papilloma virus for young girls.

#### The Name of the Cancer
Only 33% (14/45) were familiar with the term “cervix” or could identify its location. They did not equate “cervix” with commonly used phrases (cuello de la matrix or entrada de la matrix).

#### The Reproductive System
Many women knew the words, but not the “arrangement” of female organs. There were varying understandings described: (1) the matriz & vientre meant the same thing, (2) the matriz was inside the vientre which was equivalent to abdomen, or (3) the matriz was more like the vagina, & the baby formed higher in the abdomen in the vientre. (These women did not realize that the uterus was an organ that enlarged into the upper abdomen with pregnancy. See illustration of this model below.)

#### Common Name for the Uterus
Only 11% of women chose the Spanish term el utero to describe the organ where babies are formed. This term is often used in pamphlets vs. more favored terms la matriz (49%) & el vientre (38%). To teach, something familiar, a pear, can be used to illustrate the correct anatomical relationship of the uterus & the cervix. The uterus is shaped like an upside-down pear. The lower narrow part is called the cervix. The cervix forms a canal between the uterus & the vagina.

#### “Abnormal Cells”
The term “cell” was often unknown, or thought to be something abnormal, like a germ that intrudes into the body. It was not understood that cells were normal elements making up the entire body. To teach, one cell in the body can be compared to one bean in a pot of beans, one grape in a bunch of grapes, or one granule of corn in a tortilla.

#### These women wanted to learn, & consistently expressed desired for more information & greater detail, versus shorter, simpler formats used for low literacy learners.

This research suggests the need for adaptations of educational materials, **BUT IS THAT ENOUGH??**

### While adapting teaching materials for low literacy learners is a helpful short-term measure, literacy impacts far more than health!

Life tasks requiring literacy are vast, including reading bus schedules, maps, & medicine labels, using ATMs, completing job & tax forms, paying bills, & having the confidence to ask questions and communicate with others.

Without this confidence, individuals assume a passive role, retreat into silence, lose their rights, & deny society the benefit of unrealized talents.

Adult education to improve overall literacy is a more upstream, far-reaching approach than adapting educational materials for low literacy learners. It is vastly needed as one in four Americans (40-44 million) cannot read (NALS, 2003).

An anatomy learning packet is one example of products that could be developed & marketed to provide improved basic education and literacy for adults who lack this advantage. Increasing adult literacy & basic education would not only help individuals, but, in turn, would promote community social & economic development. To improve a community’s adult literacy, **collaborations between education, health care, & business are essential**, as this endeavor is beyond what can be addressed in clinical settings alone.

### NEEDED: CREATIVE KANSAS CITY COLLABORATIONS!

Some thoughts...

School-based clinics have been quite effective. What about clinic-based schools?

Parish nurses function effectively in church communities – how about parish teachers and church-based adult education?

Some study participants (above) wished they could take the same classes as their children– for their own education & to help them help their children. Could select classes be:

- open to parents?
- reproduced as DVDs for home?
- televised via Public Television?
- streamed live in local libraries?
- provided as before or after work options by employers?

Could community based adult education be a new area of study in universities?

Planned downsizing in KC Public Schools may leave teachers unemployed. Could new opportunities in adult education & literacy decrease unemployment in this sector?

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