

Helping Patients Understand and Manage Medications: Three Steps

By Judith A. Greenfield, PhD, RN

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Some patients are well on their way to becoming active partners in their care. Others are not. Both groups of patients, however, can benefit greatly from physicians and allied professionals who offer help in this regard. Nowhere is this more true, or important, than in helping patients understand and manage their medication. What follows are three ways professionals can help patients do just that.

Help Patients Become “Health Literate”

Helping patients understand and manage their medications begins with the provision of clear and understandable explanations regarding what they are, what they are for, what to expect, how to take them, and so on. Whether oral or written, a key to these explanations is an understanding that health literacy – “the ability to read about, understand and act on health information” – is an important health issue that transcends race, age, income and education and is a strong predictor of an individual’s health status.¹ To help remedy this situation, the [Partnership for Clear Health Communication](#), a coalition of national organizations, offers communication guidelines for patients and professionals. Visitors to their web site can print out or download a “Words to Watch” fact sheet, which presents a list of words – some seemingly clear – that might not be fully understood by patients. In these instances, alternative words or phrases are provided. Clicking on buttons for provider information will lead to a “Download/Order Materials” button that, in turn, leads to the fact sheet button.

Help Patients Understand the Prescription Form

In an article entitled “[How to Be Drug Smart](#),” Russell Wild advises patients to ensure that their prescriptions are dispensed as written. He also advises that they learn how to proofread those prescriptions.² To this end, he provides a chart with Latin words, their abbreviations as used in prescriptions, and what they mean. While this might be helpful, it would probably be easier for patients if practitioners were to follow suggestions such as those offered by the California Medical Association (CMA) in their document “[Safe Medication Principles](#).” Aside from legible printing, CMA suggests that, in writing out prescriptions, practitioners shift from Latin abbreviations to written out English words. For example, they suggest the use of “daily” instead of “q.d.,” “four times daily” instead of “q.i.d.” and “unit” instead of “u”. They also suggest writing out numbers – that is, “thirty” instead of “30.”³

Help Patients Find Safe, Effective and Affordable Prescription Drugs

The costs of prescription drugs are skyrocketing and an increasing number of patients are either going without or finding more affordable and, in some instances, less reliable sources of those drugs. They need help. Medical practitioners and patient advocates can provide such help in a number of ways. If prescribing either generic or older, safe and

effective drugs instead of newer more costly drugs is not an option, information about public and private pharmacy assistance programs could be provided. Using information provided on the [Healthcare Communication Project](#) web site, patients can seek out answers on their own. Nevertheless, finding such information in medical practices, health-related or social service agencies, can be very helpful.

In particular, [Needymeds](#) serves as an excellent online resource for information about private prescription assistance programs. Upon becoming a not-for-profit in early 2002, Needymeds, set about to expand its educational offerings. While all its information has been, and continues to be, available free to all web site visitors, they now offer a manual available only to doctors' offices, agencies and other sites as a means of making patient access to this information easier. The charge for the manual, which contains all the information on the web site, includes free updates for one year. To learn more about the offerings of this organization, click on the above link and visit their site. ف

¹ See www.askme3.org and click on information for providers

² Russell Wild, "How to Be Drug Smart," *AARP The Magazine Online*, at www.aarpmagazine.org/tools/Articles/a2003-01-16-drugsmart.

³ See www.safer.healthcare.ucla.edu/safer/archive/general735

Judith A. Greenfield is contributing editor of the *Healthcare Communication Review* and President of the Healthcare Communication Project, Inc.

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