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Health Literacy: Understanding Medication Labels

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Introduction: According to the Institute of Medicine (IOM), over 90 million people in the U.S. have difficulty understanding and using health information including medication labels. Purpose: To determine how individuals interpret medication labels and the relationship between medication label interpretation and level of health literacy. Method: Participants were recruited from a student-run health fair and a University Relay for Life. After securing consent, participants completed demographic information and the Rapid Estimate of Adult Literacy in Medicine (REALM). Participants were asked to blindly choose three medication containers from a bag. The labels were prepared by a registered pharmacist and affixed to medication containers. In response to questions, participants relayed information perceived to be on the labels. Sample: There were a total of 21 participants. Ages ranged from 18-89 years. Education levels varied from 10th grade to master's degree. Findings: Using content analysis, respondents were unable to correctly interpret dosing directions on four out five medication labels. Participants added incorrect information not on the labels. No relationship was found between REALM scores and the ability to correctly interpret medication labels. Conclusions: Findings support that nurses should ask clients to restate medication label information. This assessment of understanding may increase a client's ability to adhere to the medication regimen.

Information about the Authors:

Jennifer Sechrist, Brittany O'Reilly, Katherine Jankauski, and Emily Czekala are seniors and Lily Salinas is a junior. All authors are nursing students who understand the impact that low health literacy can have on health outcomes. During clinical experiences, we see firsthand how misunderstanding medication labels can affect a patient's health. As a group, we chose the research project, designed the method, collected the data, and completed the analysis. In the future, we will look for a way to integrate technology into clinical practice to enhance medication understanding and adherence to medical regimen.

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