

» RURAL PHARMACY

Medicines Book: a communication tool

BY TOBIAS SPEARE

Pharmacists play a key role in the safe and effective use of medicines. An important, and often overlooked, influence on how medicines are used is the health literacy of consumers. Health literacy is described as 'how people understand information about health and health care, and how they apply that information to their lives, use it to make decisions and act on it'.¹

Health literacy comprises two components: individual health literacy related to skills, knowledge, motivation and capacity of individual consumers, and the health literacy environment related to features of the health system. It is estimated that almost 60% of Australian adults do not have a level of individual health literacy adequate to meet the complex demands of everyday life.² Low individual health literacy is associated with poorer health status, worse outcomes, higher use of health services, increased cost to health care system, and premature death.³ It is estimated that people with low individual health literacy are up to three times more likely to experience an adverse outcome.⁴

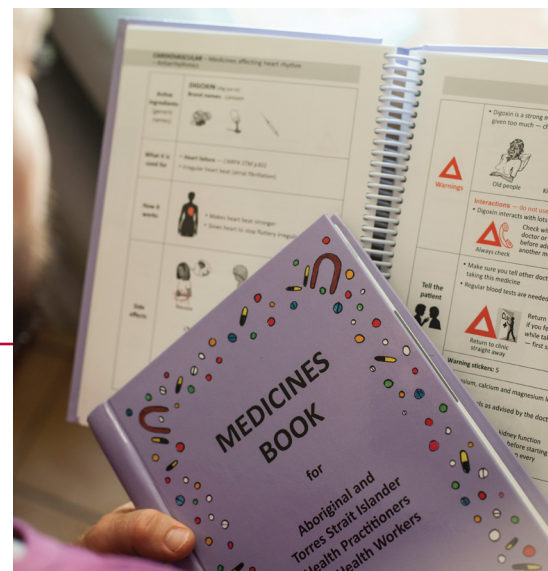
Improving health literacy is thought to minimise barriers to safe and high-quality healthcare, improve health outcomes, and reduce disparities and inequities in health. Effective communication is a key strategy in improving health literacy.¹ All members of the healthcare team play a role in addressing health literacy. Pharmacists as 'medicines expert' are especially well placed to improve consumer understanding of the medicines they are using and how to take them to ensure optimum outcomes. Provision of medicines information that is understandable and accessible can improve people's

knowledge, understanding and ability to implement treatments.

While there are many quality resources available to assist with communicating medicines information, including Consumer Medicines Information, the *Australian Medicines Handbook* and NPS MedicineWise there are times when these are not appropriate.

What resources are available when English is not a first language, people have limited literacy, there are differences in belief systems around disease causation, or there are no pharmacists to assist with the provision of medicines information?

These are challenges that health workers in remote Indigenous communities grapple with daily. Assisting them to overcome these challenges is the *Medicines Book for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health Practitioners and Health Workers (Medicines Book)*.⁵ The *Medicines Book* is a communication tool that provides accessible education about medicines by summarising the most important and relevant information and incorporating a pictorial format that is easily understood at a basic literary level. The *Medicines Book* is part of a suite of Remote Primary Health Care Manuals (RPHCM) that are grounded in evidence-based practice and the practicalities of the remote context. There is extensive input from



remote health professionals, including Aboriginal Health Practitioners, to ensure the *Medicines Book* is relevant, effective and culturally appropriate. While it was developed specifically for remote and Indigenous practice it is relevant and appropriate for other settings where literacy or language are barriers to communication, and is freely accessible on the RPHCM website: www.remotephcmmanuals.com.au.

Effective communication in regard to treatment decisions is vital in ensuring good health. The use of communication tools, such as the *Medicines Book*, can greatly assist the communication process.

References

1. Australian Commission on Safety and Quality in Health Care. Health literacy: Taking action to improve safety and quality. Sydney: Australian Commission on Safety and Quality in Health Care, 2014.
2. Australian Bureau of Statistics. Health Literacy, Australia. Canberra: Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2008.
3. Berkman ND, Sheridan SL, Donahue KE, Halpern DJ, Viera A, Crotty K, et al. Health literacy interventions and outcomes: an updated systematic review. Evidence report/technology assessment. 2011 Mar(199):1-941. PubMed PMID: 23126607. Pubmed Central PMCID: Pmc4781058. Epub 2011/03/01. eng.
4. Dewalt DA, Berkman ND, Sheridan S, Lohr KN, Pignone MP. Literacy and health outcomes: a systematic review of the literature. *Journal of general internal medicine*. 2004 Dec;19(12):1228-39. PubMed PMID: 15610334. Pubmed Central PMCID: Pmc1492599. Epub 2004/12/22. eng.
5. Centre for Remote Health. *Medicines Book for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health Practitioners and Workers* (3rd edition). 3 ed. Alice Springs: Centre for Remote Health; 2014.

Tobias Speare is Pharmacist Academic, Centre for Remote Health, Alice Springs.