

## 2007–2010 health literacy audit results

### Health literacy facts

- Health literacy is defined as the ability to read, understand and act on healthcare information<sup>1</sup>
- One in six people in the UK has a literacy level below that expected of an 11-year-old<sup>2</sup>
- Reports in the press and results from the Plain Language Commission place the average reading age in the UK at 9.5 years<sup>3</sup>
- UK and European literacy levels are comparable to US levels, where almost 50% of adults read below the expected level of a 13 year old<sup>4</sup>
- Over half of England's adult population have literacy skills below the level needed to discuss a condition interactively with a doctor or specialist<sup>5</sup>
- People with poor health literacy skills experience considerable difficulty adhering to their medications<sup>6</sup>
- Many studies show there is a strong, independent link between health literacy and health outcomes<sup>7</sup>
- Messages need to be tailored to both health literacy and patient activation levels in order to improve health outcomes<sup>8</sup>

### Health literacy audit methodology

HealthEd have developed two **Clear by Design™** checklists, for print and web. The checklists assess core health literacy principles (52 of them) in a variety of categories including: problem solving, easy reading, clear labels and sign-posting, page design, visual emphases and text styles.

Each principle is scored on whether it is fully met, somewhat met, or not met. The total score provides a percentage. A high percentage indicates that most health literacy principles are met.

In addition, the reading age of each piece is measured using Fry's Readability Formula.<sup>9</sup>

Below is a summary of the audits completed to date.

**Clear**  
by design™

### Summary of HealthEd health literacy audit findings 2007–2010<sup>10</sup>

Therapy area	Number of items reviewed	Average Fry score (reading age)	Average Clear By Design™ score (%)
<b>Oncology</b> (breast cancer, bowel cancer, and head and neck cancer)	16	14	56
<b>Haematology</b> (haemophilia)	33	15	51
<b>Rheumatology</b> (rheumatoid arthritis)	17	17	43
<b>Mental health</b> (attention-deficit hyperactivity disorder [ADHD] in children and adults, bipolar disorder, schizophrenia, and generalised anxiety disorder)	81	17	41
<b>Central nervous system disorders</b> (multiple sclerosis)	10	15	54
<b>TOTALS</b>	<b>157</b>	<b>15.5</b>	<b>49</b>

NOTE: sample sizes for health literacy audits in nutrition and respiratory therapy areas were too small for meaningful analysis

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## Key findings

- One hundred and fifty-seven tactics (not initially developed by HealthEd) were reviewed between 2007 and 2010
- The average reading age of all the tactics was 15.5 years, which is 5–6 years higher than the recommended reading age level for effective education
- The average **Clear By Design**<sup>TM</sup> score across all items was 49%, indicating that over half of the health literacy principles in the reviewed tactics were not met
- The most common principles that were not met included:
  - Material focuses mainly on behaviours (“how to” information) rather than medical facts
  - Context is given to help readers understand new information
  - Fry assessment demonstrates reading level is at aged 11 or lower
  - Graphics and illustrations are used to enhance understanding, such as demonstrating desired behaviours
  - Information is “chunked” and employs sub-headers or other devices to prepare reader for upcoming material

## Outcomes

- HealthEd made a number of simple recommendations to each product/business unit team to help improve the health literacy of their patient education programmes
- Anonymised audit results were shared with a number of stakeholders involved in developing patient education materials in order to promote health literacy as a key success factor in patient education

## About HealthEd

HealthEd is a specialised agency that uses education to help people develop the knowledge, skills, motivation and confidence they need to manage important health decisions, and ultimately achieve better health outcomes. We combine an unrivalled knowledge into patient needs and behaviour with the critical skills required to develop these insights into tailored educational content and design, across aligned programs and media. Our focus on addressing patient needs helps drive the changes necessary to improve the patient experience of your brand and of healthcare.

We apply health literacy principles to all of the materials we develop. This includes running Fry assessments, performing health literacy evaluations using our bespoke **Clear by Design**<sup>TM</sup> checklists which assess up to 52 core health literacy principles and completing user-testing of all programmes with the target audience.

For more information about any of HealthEd’s services, please contact Cally Clarkson ([cally@healthed.co.uk](mailto:cally@healthed.co.uk)) or Heather Bennett ([heather@healthed.co.uk](mailto:heather@healthed.co.uk)).



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