Gaps in Research on Public Health and Health Literacy

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The Challenge

- Public health issues and frameworks have not been well-articulated in health literacy
  - Primary focus: clear communication with the public
  - Some conceptual pieces from Kickbusch, Nutbeam, Gazmararian et al., Zarcadoolas, et al.
  - Few population level studies of health literacy
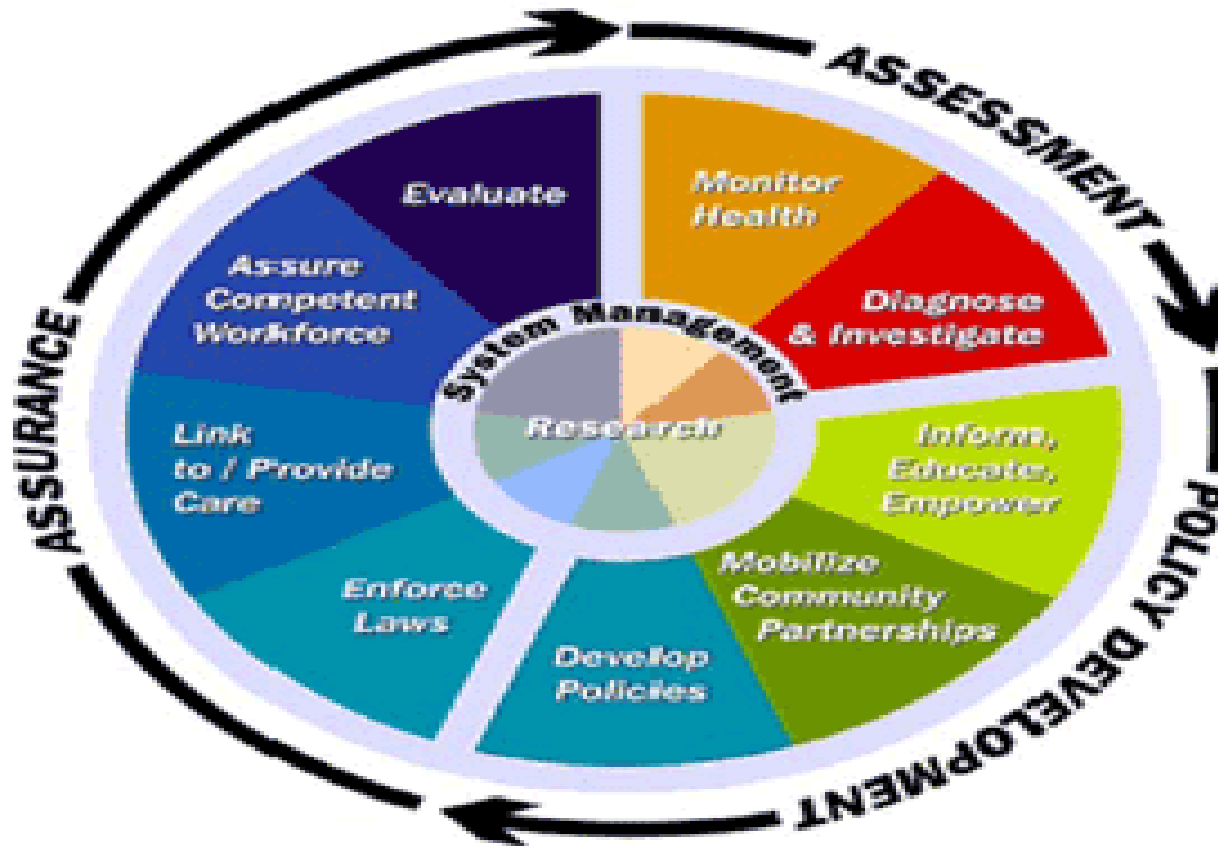
What is Health Literacy for Public Health?

A "working definition": What we do as a <u>society</u> to ensure that health information and services are <u>available</u>, <u>understandable</u>, and <u>usable</u> by everyone.

Motivations to Address Gaps

- Success of prior PARs to stimulate research
- Findings from 2006 Surgeon General's Workshop to Improve Health Literacy
- Draft National Action Plan to Improve Health Literacy
  - Goal 6:Increase basic research and the development, implementation and evaluation of practices and interventions to improve health literacy.
  - Goal 7: Increase the dissemination and use of evidence-based health literacy practices and interventions.

1) 10 Essential Public Health Functions

Public Health Functions Steering Committee (1994). Essential Functions of Public Health. Accessible online at:
http://www.health.gov/phfunctions/public.htm

Examples of What We Can Do Using the 10 Essential Services

- Build health literacy monitoring into other PH surveillance

- Investigate root causes of limited health literacy

- Use existing literatures, such as community mobilization, to inform health literacy partnerships

2) Healthy People 2020

- 4 Overarching Goals
  - Eliminate preventable disease, disability, injury, and premature death
  - Achieve health equity, eliminate disparities, and improve the health of all groups
  - Create social and physical environments that promote good health for all.
  - Promote healthy development and healthy behaviors across every stage of life.
    - See www.healthypeople.gov

Address Gaps by Asking Questions such as…

- How do we change population-level health literacy to help eliminate preventable disease, disability, injury, and premature death?

- What role does limited health literacy play in health inequities and disparities?

- What types of social and physical environments promote health literacy?

- How does improved health literacy inform healthy social and physical environments?

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3) Health literacy as a realization of health promotion

- Health literacy as asset (Nutbeam 2008)
- Means of enabling people to exert greater control over their health and change social determinants of health
- Skills enabling people to participate more fully
- People may not always make "healthiest" choices

Possible questions from an assets perspective

- In addition to questions about health equity, disparities and social and physical environments, questions about control and skills
  - What types of control do people need to more fully participate? How is control operationalized and realized in everyday life?
  - What skills enable people to participate fully in their health and how are these skills developed, maintained and refined over the life course?

4) Health literacy and Truly Vulnerable Populations

- PAR currently is explicit about including persons with learning and communication disorders. Expand to include intellectual and developmental disabilities.

- Special challenges for health communication when existing assessment tools, language and information formats are inadequate
  - Example: How to engage mothers with intellectual disabilities in assessing their children for symptoms of developmental delays?

Public health focus

- Change the Unit of Analysis from Individuals to Groups
  - Individuals are embedded in complex social webs that affect how they think, feel and act
  - Consider how groups make choices, respond to changing circumstances, use information and technologies
- Identify and address inequities, disparities and root causes

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