



Measuring Health Literacy and  
the 2010 and 2011 Special Issues of  
the *Journal of Health Communication*

Lauren McCormack  
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## Health literacy...

- ...is not simply a function of basic literacy skills, but is dependent on:
    - individual and system factors
    - communication skills of lay persons and professionals
    - lay and professional knowledge of health topics, culture,
    - the demands of the healthcare and public health systems,
    - the demands of the situation/context
- *Healthy People 2010*

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# Health Literacy Interventions and Outcomes: An Updated Systematic Review



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## Commentary

### Health Literacy: What Is It?

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*The concept of health literacy evolved from a history of defining, redefining, and quantifying the functional literacy needs of the adult population. Along with these changes has come the recognition that sophisticated literacy skills are increasingly needed to function in society and that low literacy may have an effect on health and health care. We present a brief history of literacy in the United States, followed by a discussion of the origins and conceptualization of health literacy. Increased attention to this important issue suggests the need to review existing definitions of the term "health literacy," because despite the growing interest in this field, one question that persists is, "What is health literacy?"*

## Commentary

### Health Literacy: A Second Decade of Distinction for Americans

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*Efforts to describe health literacy in the last decade have helped us define the issue and recognize that our public's skills and abilities are not adequate for successfully navigating the growing demands and complexity of healthcare. There have been significant developments in health literacy over the last decade, with milestones of progress. Much of the work done in the 1990s focused on defining health literacy, initially measuring its prevalence and subsequently looking at its associations. Since then, health literacy has grown from an issue of an under-recognized "silent epidemic" to an issue of health policy and reform. Ideas and objectives proposed have actually been adopted in recent years, with significant policy developments. This article recognizes many achievements and milestones while developing recommendations for implementation in the decade ahead.*

## Health Literacy: What is it? (Berkman et al)

- Lack of shared meaning of the term “health literacy”, “a source of confusion and debate” (Baker, 2006)
- The changing definition of *literacy* in U.S. history
- 13 different definitions of health literacy
  - *“Lack of consensus about the definition of health literacy could potentially handicap progress in its measurement or delay solutions to significant problems” (p.18)*

## Health Literacy: A Second Decade of Distinction (Parker & Ratzan)

- “Blueprint for change” to achieve a health literate America (Parker et al, 2003)
- Health literacy specifically included in two sections of Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act
- Recommendations
  - Coordination and oversight within HHS for timely collection of data to monitor national trends in health literacy
  - Create metrics to reflect individuals’ skills but also the demands and complexities of the system

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## Commentary

### **Back to Basics: Why Basic Research Is Needed to Create Effective Health Literacy Interventions**

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*Limited health literacy is increasingly recognized as a public health problem. Growing recognition of the problem—and the need for solutions—creates an imperative for the field of health literacy research to identify effective interventions. The National Action Plan to Improve Health Literacy (U.S. DHHS, 2010) recommends increased basic research in health literacy. This paper elaborates on this call by explicating what is meant by basic research and describing several of the ways in which basic research will benefit the field of health literacy research and, particularly, progress toward designing successful interventions.*

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## Commentary

### **Health Literacy Measurement: A Proposed Research Agenda**

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*Although the field of health literacy is experiencing tremendous growth in terms of producing peer-reviewed journal articles and attracting practitioners, the foundation of that growth is potentially unstable. Despite a steady increase in their number, existing measures and screeners of health literacy are not based on an accepted conceptual framework and fail to align with the growing body of theoretical and applied work. Existing measures are mainly focused on assessing what individuals can read and understand in clinical contexts. This leaves important factors untested, such as how individuals use information, and how health professionals and systems communicate with patients. This article outlines key elements of a proposed research agenda focusing on development of a new, comprehensive approach to measuring health literacy.*

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## A Proposed Research Agenda (Pleasant et al)

- Current measures have clearly made important contributions, but criticisms have been cited
- Lack of a broadly shared understanding about causative structures underpinning the process of using health literacy to make informed decisions and the relationship between health literacy and behavior change
- More agreement that health literacy competencies apply to information “seeker” and “giver”
- *“Building a comprehensive approach to measurement of the social construct called health literacy may well be the most significant and necessary task facing health literacy research and practice”*(p.11)

## A Call for Basic Research (Johnson et al)

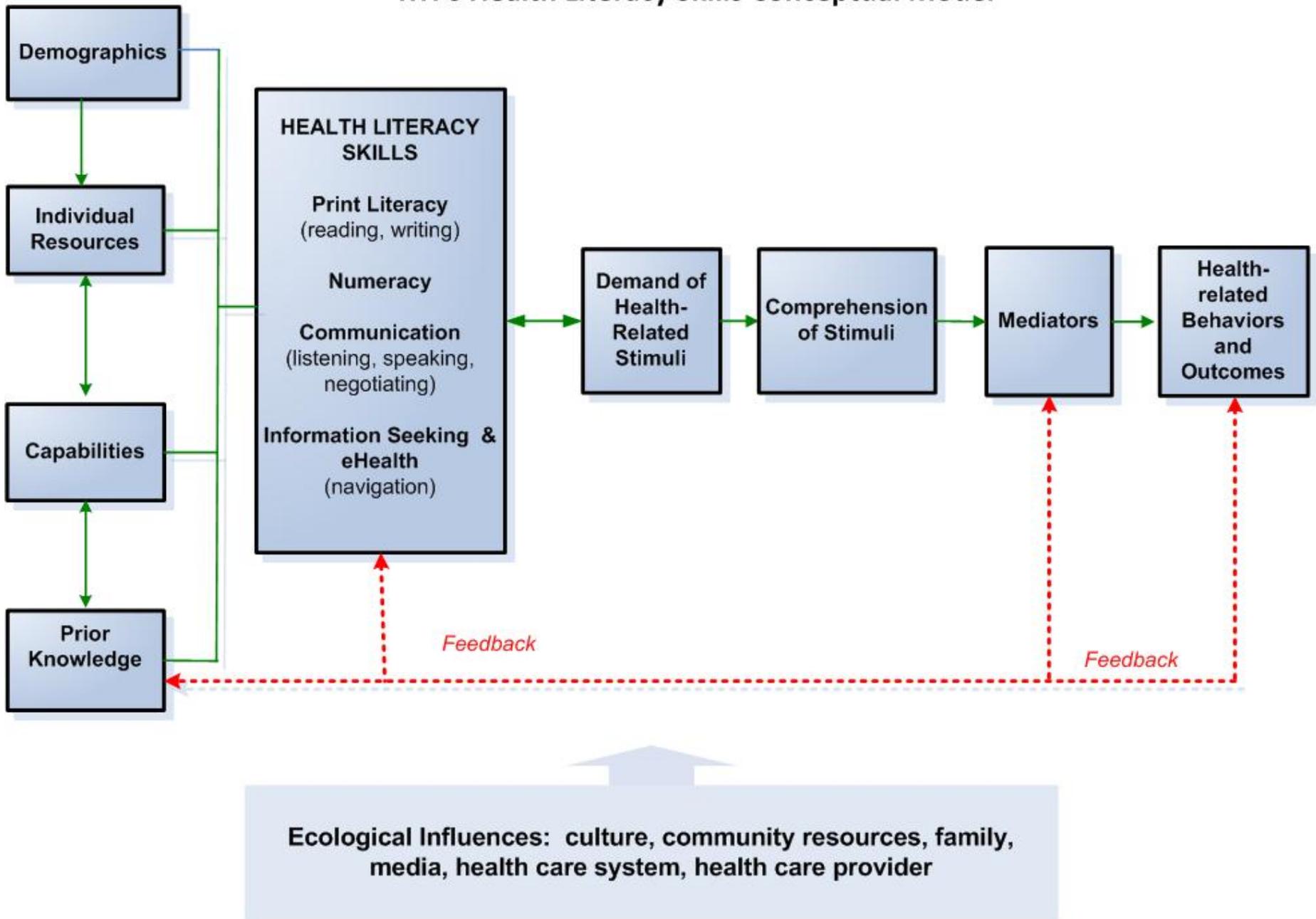
### Benefit #3: Increasing precision in measurement

- Multiple federal and non-federal sources call have called for more precise, accurate and comprehensive measurement of health literacy
- Health literacy is hindered, in part, by a lack of clarity in the definition(s) of health literacy
- By working with a smaller number of consensual definitions, the field will evolve toward agreement of what should be measured as part of health literacy

## Existing health literacy models and frameworks

- A variety of existing models and frameworks describe factors that lead to the development of health literacy skills
- Most illustrate the effects health literacy has on health related outcomes
- Few convey the predictors, moderators, mediators, and outcomes of health literacy all in one model or theory (Pleasant, 2011)

# RTI's Health Literacy Skills Conceptual Model



# Next steps for the field of health literacy measurement?

## Introduction

### **Health Literacy Research: Looking Forward**

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