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Role of health literacy in an information society

Introduction

Changes in environmental, social and technical circumstances of people's life in a society initiated in 1970s and 1980s tend to be associated with the "third stage of development of human civilization" called the information society. In the context of natural environment, this society found out that natural resources and automated technologies no longer dominate and that the principal role is now taken by information and communication technologies. In this post-industrial era, information became the most significant article. "In general terms, an information society is any society where the main role is taken by information alongside information and communication technologies (ICT), which contribute to improved quality of life" [Pifka 2010: 33]. Mutual interconnection of information and communication technologies leads to the establishment and development of an information society. Such society requires individuals' active approach in using information resources. If an individual is not capable of such approach, efficient functioning in a society is impossible. This can have an effect on the overall life quality.

1. Health

Similarly, health is a very positively perceived value nowadays for an individual as well as the whole society. Since time immemorial, people have tried to influence their health. This included empirical approaches and time-tested traditions of various ways of life or personal hygiene, often organically incorporated into religious codes of a society. Health oriented education was subject to the value system of a society as well as the severity of health issues. The implications of education and recommendations were further subject to the economic and social status of an individual and the whole society.

2. Definition and health literacy

The role of health within the population remained unchanged; people's participation in active care for their health needs to be increased. For this reason, the concept of health literacy started to evolve.

Originally, the concept of literacy covered the ability to read, write and count. Gradually, a number of other skills were added. The base concept was functional literacy, i.e. people's ability to understand, perform and participate in

the activities required for life. This concept includes for example literary literacy (ability to comprehend a text), numerical literacy (ability to operate with numbers) and document literacy (ability to search for information). In developed countries, citizens' literacy is almost 100%; however, functional literacy is only about 90%.

Idiomatically speaking, the concept of literacy covers an ability of any activity associated with mental processes [Holčík 2010]. With the development of computers, the concept of computer literacy emerged, encompassing basic user functions of a personal computer. Nowadays this concept is being redefined to digital literacy. Also, other types of literacies emerge, e.g. foreign language, political, civil, etc.

It is believed that the first to use the concept of health literacy was Simonds in 1974. He defined the concept in a document called Health education as social policy [Ratzan 2001]. Health literacy was described as health education meeting minimum standards for all school class levels. Simonds claimed it was necessary to update the curricula. He thought students should be literate in the area of health as they are literate in history and sciences.

However, scientific literature includes a number of definitions based on scientific discussions since the early 1990s.

- The WHO defines health literacy as the cognitive and social skills which determine the motivation and ability of individuals to gain access to, understand and use information in ways which promote and maintain good health. Defined this way, health literacy is dependent upon a more general level of literacy. Bad literacy limits personal, social and cultural development and prevents the development of health literacy [WHO 1998].
- According to Muro [2011], health literacy is the ability to understand, access and use health related tools and services available in a given location.
- Health literacy is also defined as a fundamental ability of an individual that facilitates the process of searching for and using information and enables control of own health. Health literacy is an ability to take correct health related decisions in the context of everyday life, i.e. at home, at work, within the health care system, in shopping centres and in politics. Health literacy strengthens the strategy for increasing an individual's control over health, ability to search for information and take responsibility for such information [Kickbusch, Wait, Maag 2006].
- Osborne [2006: 2] defines health literacy as a shared responsibility between patients (or anyone on the receiving end of health communication) and providers (or anyone on the giving end of health communication). Complete use and development of health literacy only takes place if both parties fully understand each other.

Sometimes the widely understood concept of health literacy is confused with a much narrower concept of medical literacy. Medical literacy covers an

ability of an individual to read and understand e.g. examination calls, package leaflets, recommendations for treating chronic diseases, basic understanding of the health care system, knowledge of symptoms of common diseases, etc. [Holčík 2010].

3. Role of health literacy

Unfortunately, health literacy is not sufficiently addressed or used. However, the significance of health literacy has been increasing in Europe and in the world; health literacy is becoming an inseparable part of a healthy society. The role of health literacy is documented by the following statements [Holčík 2010: 147–148]:

- “Health literacy is one of the basic tools for life”.
Health literacy can help people search for and use health related information and thus strengthen the effect on their health. The sooner a child learns the required knowledge, skills and habits and the sooner a child adopts attitudes to health and opinions about health, the greater benefit health literacy can have for the child’s health.
- “Health literacy is one of the basic tasks of health care”.
The development of health literacy within a society leads to improved overall level of health of the whole population.
- “Health literacy is a significant part of social capital”.
A low level of health literacy leads to economic losses, increased health risks and is the cause of future differences in health between various social groups.
- “Health literacy is one of significant prerequisites for health”.
Health literacy helps people improve their health. With respect to the fact that health a significant individual and social value, health literacy also becomes a similar value that is worth adopting, protecting and developing.
- “Health literacy is a significant tool for personal development”.
Health literacy strengthens people’s ability to decide about their health and life and improves their self-confidence.
- “Health literacy is a valuable part of general culture”.
The values that should become a natural part of a healthy society and its general culture include healthy lifestyle, development of positive relationships between people and strengthening personal responsibility, which is positively stimulated by health literacy.

Holčík [2010] also notes that it is not enough to encourage partial changes in individuals’ lifestyles because an individual’s care for own health does not bring a significant effect on the whole population. Instead, a substantial change in social circumstances should be encouraged to influence the health of the whole population.

All this must be performed in line with institutional support since preschool age. The Framework educational programme for elementary education does not

mention the concept of health literacy [RVP 2013]. However, the educational areas of Human and health and Health education include e.g. the issue of threats caused by electronic media communication. It is imperative that elementary school students are able to actively approach their health and health of other people [Hřivnová 2014]. A lot of health related information [Osborne 2006] can be found in booklets, leaflets and more often on web portals. To use these resources however, one must be literate in the information and digital environment.

4. Factors influencing the level of health literacy

Health literacy is a dynamic concept. As a result, people should continuously adopt new available information to maintain good health and to act as informed individuals. Medical treatment and pharmaceuticals develop all the time. Similarly, the availability of health care services and their quality changes. Searching for relevant information is almost impossible without ICT skills.

Health literacy has become the focus of many research teams. New approaches to health literacy are identified and new models proposed. The objective of the research is to limit negative consequences of a low level of health literacy and to search for new methods of its improvement [Holčík 2010].

The barriers preventing individuals and the whole society from increasing health literacy were defined as follows:

1) Individual level:

- Low individual interest in reading and writing,
- Low level of education, insufficient knowledge of health care,
- Cultural bias subject to traditions,
- Life of an individual with health disability,
- Decrease in the level of health literacy as a result of ageing,
- Insufficient understanding of physician's instructions,
- Decreased ability to ask a physician for explanation,
- Decreased ability to ask a pharmacist for explanation of drug use,
- Feeling that an individual does not deserve longer physician's time.

2) Population level:

- Schools (territorial deviations between schools, budget limitations and insufficient focus on physical education and health education, insufficient number of qualified teachers of physical education and health education),
- Health related information and communication (people with a lower degree of education prefer commercial texts that are simpler and seemingly easier to comprehend, however, a number of such texts are confusing). Another cause of various levels of health literacy is the internet, which is becoming the most significant source of information, and the ability to use the internet (link to information literacy),

- Health care system (an older patient has difficulty understanding medical terms and selecting between risks, such patient tends to underestimate the importance of self-monitoring and a timely request for medical assistance),
- Health professionals (physicians and other people in the health care sector play a significant role in health care and health literacy – however, some of them are not aware of their important functions).

Conclusion

All of us should be interested in increasing own health literacy. However, it would be false to assume that an educated person with a high level of information literacy automatically knows what is most beneficial in terms of health, healthy food or healthy lifestyle. Even educated people die each year from curable diseases (AIDS, cardiovascular diseases, lifestyle diseases, etc.) The truth is however that individuals with a low level of information literacy will have less knowledge in the area of traditional health education as well as a lower level of health literacy. In the future these individuals will also have less developed abilities and skills to obtain relevant information and act accordingly.

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Abstract

The paper addresses the role of health literacy in a contemporary information society. Specifically, the paper defines the concept of health literacy, not only from a WHO perspective but also according to various authors. The paper also analyses the factors influencing the level of health literacy in a population. One of the conclusions of the paper is the need for continuous improvement of people's health literacy, which nowadays cannot do without institutional and lifelong learning and also efficient use of information technologies.

Key words: information society, health, health literacy, factors influencing the level of health literacy.