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History and evolution of the term ‘health literacy’

The term ‘health literacy’ has expanded and developed over the past three decades. Modern definitions encompass a broad range of characteristics, assets and actions, and recognise the social dimension of health-related decision-making.

Early uses of the term ‘health literacy’
The earliest ideas about health literacy evolved from the more general concept of ‘functional literacy’ in the 1960s and 1970s. Functional literacy sought to capture the reading and writing abilities that people need to participate in society, including being able to complete forms, manage finances, and understand what they are entitled to. The term ‘health literacy’ was first used in 1974 to consider similar issues related to how people look after their health.

Expansion of the term ‘health literacy’
Through the 1970s, 1980s and 1990s the concept of health literacy was expanded to include other cognitive and social skills thought necessary for people to obtain and understand information so that they could use it to guide health-related decisions. These additional skills included concepts such as having the confidence to ask questions of doctors and health professionals; knowing what to do when they receive conflicting information; and being able to participate in public debates about health issues in their communities.²⁻¹