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Analyzing medical informative texts to enhance health literacy

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Introduction

During hospital treatment or homecare, patients and caregivers often feel anxious for not knowing the medical procedures or drug prescribed to them. It is thus crucial to enhance their health literacy, which refers to 'the degree to which individuals have the capacity to obtain, process, and understand basic health information and services needed to make appropriate health decisions' (Schwartzberg, VanGeest, & Wang, 2005). Findings in HA Patient Satisfaction Survey (HA PSS, 2010) confirm patients wish to obtain more information on the healthcare they receive. Recommendations have been made not only to strengthening effective communication but also addressing the need of enhancing health literacy in society (p.10-11). HA Public Complaints Committee (HA PCC, 2012) also points out that fostering patient engagement in communication can enhance the quality and safety of care. Plain language is often suggested as the most direct solution but fails to provide practical guidance in what to do.

Objectives

Twofold objective: 1)To examine the contribution of medical informative texts to the delivery of healthcare, and to rise greater awareness in health literacy through medical informative texts; and 2)To identify the key language features found in medical informative texts that enhance or hinder health literacy.

Methodology

Medical informative texts were collected from the HA Smart Patient Website (SPW, <http://www21.ha.org.hk/smartpatient/>) and analyzed by contemporary language model of Systemic Functional Linguistics to identify language features and patterns that enhance or hinder health literacy. HA Smart Patient Website is chosen because it serves as an online platform for the general public, in particular patients and their caregivers, to access medical and healthcare information at one spot. Assessing its effectiveness is one of the most relevant ways to respond to the recommendations made at PPS to steer health literacy development in Hong Kong.

Result

The analysis shows that medical informative texts are hard to comprehend and detached from the readers because of insufficient contextual and interpersonal consideration, such as emphasizing too much on technical terms and metaphors without relating them to the context of communication with patients. Inconsistent use of interpersonal language features also causes confusion, which hinders health literacy. Recommendations addressing these issues are made to improve medical informative texts to in turn enhance health literacy.