The Sixth Vital Sign

Fna Forms New Committee To Tackle Low Health Literacy

Nearly half of all Americans have difficulty using and understanding health information, and this leads to a higher rate of hospitalization and use of emergency services among these people, according to the Institute of Medicine. The low rate of health literacy in the U.S. is cause for concern for leaders of the Florida Nurses Association. In an effort to make headway on this complex issue, the FNA has formed a new Health Literacy Committee that convened for the first time in July.

“Our goal is to educate nurses about the importance of screening, assessing and treating low health literacy and advocating for patients to be responsible healthcare consumers,” says Dorothy Dunn, PhD, ARNP, FNP-BC, who submitted the proposal for action to the FNA. “We are looking at health literacy as the sixth vital sign.”

Health literacy is more than a patient’s reading level, but also includes writing, understanding arithmetic and conceptual knowledge, explains Dunn, a clinical nurse instructor and family nurse practitioner at Florida Atlantic University’s Christine E. Lynn College of Nursing in Boca Raton.

“Sometimes the smartest people don’t understand how the body works and what their health issues are about,” she says.

The committee, which is composed of eight FNA members, is striving to first educate nurses about the problem of low health literacy. To raise awareness, The Florida Nurse newspaper, which is distributed to all nurses in the state, has started a literacy corner column to cover topics such as the nurse’s role in health literacy.

Dunn also has been tasked with contacting Florida nursing schools to determine whether there are programs to educate students about health literacy. In addition, the committee has launched a contest for a new health literacy logo the FNA will use as it moves forward.

The committee’s longer-term goal is to provide nurses with materials they can use to assess health literacy and then educate patients. “My hope is that we will become the go-to group when it comes to limited health literacy in the state,” says Edward Briggs, FNP, NP, chairman of the committee. “I hope we can be a one-stop shop where providers can get resources to educate patients.”