Health Literacy and the Affecting Factors: A Study in Five Provinces of Iran

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Background & Objective: Health literacy is defined as the degree to which individuals have the capacity to obtain, process, and understand basic health information and services required for making appropriate health decisions. The aim of this study was to estimate the level of health literacy and to determine the factors influencing it using valid instrument.

Methods: In a Population-based household survey in 5 cities and 5 villages of Boushehr, Mazandaran, Kermanshah, Ghazvin and Tehran provinces, 1086 adults aged 18 and older were enrolled into the study. Health literacy was measured by the questionnaire designed for test of Functional Health Literacy in Adults (TOFHLA) after validation. Regression analysis was used to determine the association of demographic factors and level of health literacy.

Results: The average response rate was 70.8% in the studied clusters. From all participants, 61.4% were female and the rest were male. Mean age of participants was 38.1 years. Seventeen percent of the study population was illiterate and 36% had diploma or higher education. The level of health literacy was adequate in 28.1%, borderline in 15.3% and inadequate in 56.5% of the subjects. Mean score of health literacy was 45.3 in males and 41.1 in females (P=0.057). However, after adjustment for educational level in the regression model, health literacy was found to be higher in females (P=0.14). Limited health literacy was also associated with lower economic status (P=0.004).

Conclusion: This study indicates that the level of health literacy is low in Iran. Educational level was the most important determinant of health literacy and the most increase was seen in subjects with more than 8 years education. Lower health literacy in women, older people and rural inhabitants was mainly due to lower educational levels in these groups.

Key words: Health literacy, survey, influencing factors

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