People Profile: Patricia Pinkowski

Editor
The Center for Medicare and Medicaid Services saw a need to meet the information needs of caregivers. In September 2008 they launched an initiative designed primarily for caregivers. The initiative, Ask Medicare, includes a Website: www.medicare.gov/caregiver, and an e-newsletter. This project was launched in response to the large number of inquires The Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services receives from caregivers on behalf of Medicare recipients. Information and tools are provided to help navigate Medicare, deal with billing issues, make informed medical decisions, and cope with caregiving pressures.

Complementary & Alternative Therapies

Issue: Interest in complementary and alternative therapies is not new. But the scientific and medical community is finally paying attention. Reputable information and research in alternative therapies are rapidly increasing.

Once upon a time the only places you could find information on complementary and alternative therapies were in sources that were considered “quack” medicine, or in the ads of questionable magazines. The National Institutes of Health now sponsors the National Center for Complementary and Alternative Medicine (http://nccam.nih.gov/) to provide information, train researchers, and fund research. This is an especially active field for diseases and conditions that have no traditional medical treatment. Clinical trials related to complementary therapies can be found in standard listings such as ClinicalTrials.gov.

There is also a broader definition for what is included under complementary and alternative. It encompasses not only herbal supplements but things like art, music, pet, doll, and massage therapies.

LITERACY

Issue: Literacy levels have not improved over time implying that “easy to read” and non-print materials still need to be sources of information.

Health information literacy has been a focus since the 1970’s. The Healthy People 2000 and Healthy People 2010 initiatives define health literacy as “the degree to which individuals have the capacity to obtain, process, and understand basic health information and services needed to make appropriate health decisions.” This definition is closely tied into the basic definition of literacy as the ability to read. The 2003 National Assessment of Adult Literacy (NAAL) (U.S. Department of Education) showed little change from the 1993 survey from the same group. Thirty million people (14%) were below basic literacy skills. Sixty-three million (29%) operated at a basic skill level. The American Medical Association (AMA) has recognized the impact of literacy levels on patient compliance for years and has prepared professional training materials and reports. In 2008 the AMA Foundation released a report, “Assessing the Nation’s Health Literacy,” commenting on the health implications of the NAAL literacy report. Those at the lowest end of the literacy range were less likely to use either the Internet or written materials to get health information. They were more likely to rely on information from TV and radio, health care professionals, and what they were told by family and friends.

Since its inception in 1991 our library has experienced a great demand for video and DVD products. The Food and Drug Administration, the National Cancer Institute, and most of the National Institutes of Health now provide “easy to read” materials. The Alzheimer’s Association has tried to be aware of literacy levels in our publications, both in print and on the Website. Former wisdom was to write materials at a 5th grade level. Recent comments have been that this is now considered too high and materials need to be written at a 3rd grade level.

Additional Information

No matter if they have lifetime experience in serving consumer health information needs, or are just getting started in this area, librarians can still rely on professional colleagues who share their knowledge in the literature and through library association sections.