

# Health literacy key to improving health outcomes in South East Asia

February 12 2015, by Mandi O'garretty

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The South East Asia Regional Office of the World Health Organization (WHO), in partnership with Deakin University, has today (10 February) launched a set of health literacy tools and resources created to improve health and reduce inequalities for much of the world.

The Health Literacy Toolkit was launched at the World Congress of Public Health in Kolkata, India. Health literacy is at the heart of what enables people to understand and engage in [health](#) actions and care – from lifesaving treatment, to understanding that smoking is dangerous for one's health and how to prevent disease.

The Toolkit encourages key actions and strategies across governments, health services and with health consumers across the world. People living in Low and Middle-Income (LMIC) countries, such as India, Indonesia and Thailand, particularly those with little education, can have very poor access to quality health information and services. The Toolkit seeks to guide improvements in health and reduce inequities by empowering policymakers, professionals and people to work together to improve access to, and the quality of, healthcare.

"Health literacy is an important and under-recognised factor that is a cause of health inequalities and poor health outcomes across such countries. Practical strategies to tackle [health literacy](#) challenges, such as those in this toolkit, are needed to build and enhance the response of health systems," said toolkit co-author Professor Richard Osborne, Deakin University.

The new Health Literacy Toolkit addresses priority health literacy issues in LMIC countries in a package of accessible briefings which are targeted at influential health professionals, politicians, policy makers and to community organisations across the region.

One health inequality the Toolkit covers in case studies are the high rates of maternal deaths in LMIC countries. WHO data indicates that although maternal deaths in India are now about one third of they were 25 years ago (148,000 deaths in 1990) there are still about 50,000 Indian women dying from maternal deaths each year. This contrasts with countries like Australia where maternal death is very rare (about 20 [maternal deaths/](#) year). Improvements in health literacy, through the use of the Toolkit, will help mothers and health professionals work together to ensure all parties are informed and empowered to get and use the best healthcare possible.

"Previous health literacy efforts have mostly focussed on improving individual reading and understanding of health information. However the barriers to healthcare access are often more complex. The next steps in health literacy need to take a whole of community approach to health practice, service delivery and health policy in developing and testing solutions," Professor Osborne said.

Lead [toolkit](#) author Dr Sarity Dodson, from Deakin University's Population Health Strategic Research Centre, said the Toolkit would support communities to develop initiatives that more effectively target the root causes of preventable illness and act to engage communities in actions to maintain and improve health.

"In many communities there are large inequalities in health service access. More must be done to address areas such as women's and children's health, and chronic disease such as diabetes," Dr Dodson said.

**More information:** 'The Health Literacy Toolkit for Low- and Middle-Income Countries' is available to download from [www.searo.who.int/entity/health\\_topics/publications/hl\\_toolkit/en/](http://www.searo.who.int/entity/health_topics/publications/hl_toolkit/en/)

Provided by Deakin University

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