

Strategies to increase the health literacy needed to complement health-promoting legislation in South Africa

The acknowledgement that nutrition is one of the major significant determinants of health has been accepted and acknowledged, and is the focus of many nutritional programmes is to ensure food safety. However, the nutritional component of health is not limited to the availability of food, but also to nutritional information about food. The South African government has implemented a number of measures to provide information to South African food consumers. Among such measures is legislation to enable consumers to make informed choices on what they buy and use, as reflected in the *Government Gazette* of March 2010 and in the salt-limiting legislation of 2013. According to the World Health Organization, health promotion is defined as the process of enabling people to take control of their lives. Complex health literacy skills are needed to enable that ability.

However, citizens are required to be health literate to utilise and benefit from such legislation. While literacy is a basic skill which enables a person to communicate with his or her world by reading and writing, health literacy implies skills which enable a person, not only to read and write, but also to read and interpret health information, including nutrition information. Health literacy is a skill which enables a person to navigate health and disease information, to perceive the bigger “picture” and to make informed choices. Therefore, health literacy is a survival requirement in a world in which the determinants of health are becoming increasingly complex.

A health-literate person is one who is able to make inferences from health information, draw conclusions and understand cause-and-

effect relationships between action and results. He or she is able to read and understand information on food labels, and the required daily nutrients of food items, as well understand the meaning of blood sugar, blood pressure and body mass index numbers.

Health-promoting legislation is essential, but requires implementation strategies which will increase health literacy. This will enable citizens to gain access to and interpret the various elements of health information which influence their decision-making and the choices that they make. Much as the South African government is applauded for implementing a range of health-promoting legislation, such legislation is of limited use if people are not health literate. The challenge is to develop strategies to increase health literacy among South Africans.

While the school system has some responsibility in ensuring literacy, health professionals, including those in schools of public health, have a responsibility to make a positive impact on health literacy in the country. They need be concerned about the health of South African populations if they are to accept this challenge. Health literacy requires intentional programmes, processes and efforts, as it does not come automatically with basic literacy.

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