Survey on health information literacy in a cohort of elderly people in Pescara (Italy) in 2017. Are they fully aware of the implications behind Internet search?

P. De Castro¹, G. Cognetti², V. Scarinci², E. Poltronieri¹, R. Perilli³

Corresponding author: paola.decastro@iss.it

1) Istituto Superiore di Sanità, Rome, Italy; 2) IRCCS Regina Elena National Cancer Institute, Rome, Italy; 3) Territorial Social Ophthalmology Unit, AUSL, Pescara, Italy;

Background

Health information literacy is widely recognised as an important social determinant of health, although it is difficult to measure it at national, regional and local level.

Aim

This study aims to measure the level of health information literacy in a sample of elderly people in the city of Pescara (Central Italy).

Methods

The study was conducted through a questionnaire during an eye screening in a cohort of elderly people in 2017. 595 individuals (over 60 years of age) were asked to take part in the survey; 429 of them agreed to participate. The questionnaire was organised into two sections, the first one was set up by the authors of this paper, whilst the second one was based on the European Health Information Literacy Survey (HLS-EU).

Results

414 questionnaires were eligible for analysis. Participants’ age ranged from 60 to over 80 years. Data collected refer to the number of respondents per question. As far as the gender of respondents, the most (283 out of 411) were women (69%), while the men were 128 (31%). The sample revealed low education level: only 9% had a degree and/or post-doc; 25% had a high school diploma, 39% attended only primary school and 27% junior high school. The sample was quite homogeneous, also because most respondents belonged to a low/middle income population group.

The survey showed that the general practitioner and specialist doctor were the preferred source to get information on health, and Internet was the least used source (22%, 91 out of 414). Most participants declared to seek information in Italian language.

As regards the subject of information retrieved, the answers collected (90) highlighted that the majority of respondents looked for information on diseases in general (94%), on therapies (77%), on nutrition issues (74%), and on diagnosis (69%). A good percentage looks for information on drugs (50%) and on health facilities (44%). The search for information on the Internet, however, includes a relevant variety of issues.

Participants appeared to be fairly satisfied with results achieved from their searches, without showing any reasonable doubt that there could be fake news or misleading information. Most of them also declared that they easily understand what their practitioner says. Besides, they claimed they did not find any difficulty in understanding medicines’ labels and drug prescriptions, or in coping with other health conditions such as mental health, hypertension, tobacco smoking, alcohol abuse etc.

Conclusion

This survey addressed a homogeneous group of elderly people in a small area of Central Italy. Most respondents declared to have an easy access and understanding of health information. Those searching the Internet declared to be rather satisfied with the results they gained, without questioning their reliability. Yet results showed that respondents were not aware that information overload requires critical skills in order to select trusted and updated medical information, properly targeted to people who need it.

In any case, health information literacy is difficult to measure, and this survey supports the need for further investigations towards the adoption of best practices.