A qualitative exploration of the facilitators and barriers to meeting older adults' health literacy needs in clinical practice

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Introduction: Health literacy is about individuals' ability to access, understand and use health information. Lower health literacy levels are prevalent in older adult populations and associated with poor health outcomes. There is growing interest in interventions to improve health literacy but little research exploring patient and healthcare professionals' perspectives on this.

Objectives: This research aimed to explore facilitators and barriers to meeting older adults' health literacy needs in clinical practice.

Method: Semi-structured interviews were conducted with nine older adults (65 and above) with varying health literacy levels accessing a falls clinic. Four focus groups were completed with 22 nursing and allied healthcare professionals working with older adults. Interviews explored older adults' views about provider-patient interactions and focus groups explored healthcare professionals' views about meeting older adults' health literacy needs. Interpretative phenomenological analysis and framework analysis were applied to the data.

Results: Common themes that emerged from interviews and focus groups included the importance of building trust and tailoring information to individuals' needs and limitations of using health literacy screening. All older adults emphasised the importance of clear and simple communication; contrastingly, healthcare professionals expressed concerns about using 'universal precautions' with all patients. Healthcare professionals also had low awareness about health literacy.

Conclusions: There are discrepancies between what older adult's desire in provider-patient interactions and healthcare professionals' perceptions about this. This may result in ineffective communication and reduced patient understanding and adherence. To engage older adults in their health, healthcare professionals need support to develop skills to meet health literacy needs.