

Cancer, Culture and Literacy: Critical Next Steps in Improving Care for Diverse Populations

Never before have we seen a year in which dissemination of information has been so vital for the safety and well-being of people affected by natural disasters. The need for clear, crisp, and meaningful information has been heightened as people try to understand where to go, what to do, when to do it, and how to get through each day. In a similar fashion, a need exists for practical and usable cancer information, from prevention to survivorship. For example, where do I go to get screened? What happens now that a lump is found? How do I get through all these insurance forms? Who will take care of my family while I get surgery? Will the treatment hurt? What are the benefits and the risks of this new study? How do I deal with these stresses? What will my life be like now? As we consider how best to address these questions, I look back to the basis for the Cancer, Culture and Literacy Institute (R25 CA 90654), which was the impetus for a journal supplement idea on the topic of *cancer, culture and literacy*. The goal of the Institute was to improve care across the continuum of cancer control by enhancing the skills of researchers responsible for creating multicultural, multilingual, and literacy-sensitive interventions and communications for a demographically changing population. While unprecedented advances in translating research findings into public health practices to reduce cancer risks have been observed over the past decade, such advances are not realized by all members of society according to age, race, ethnic and socioeconomic groups and have not been well disseminated at the community level. Significant challenges remain to close the gaps in cancer outcomes. Meeting these challenges requires an understanding and consideration of culture and literacy in cancer prevention and control in all phases of program and intervention development as outlined by a number of reports,¹⁻¹⁰ and a high degree of interdisciplinary collaboration to incorporate these elements into meaningful research outcomes. Simply put, literacy, language and culture ultimately shape our communications, give them context and direct how they are received and ultimately acted on.

The papers contained in this supplement offer ideas, approaches and opportunities across a number of

topics including race, ethnicity and culture, cancer education and literacy, health disparities, spirituality/religiosity, screening and clinical trials. We hope that this supplement spurs readers to address cultural, literacy, economic and social considerations when conceptualizing and designing research. Research approached through this perspective promotes cancer interventions and communications that foster both respect and sensitivity and embrace the ideals of social justice that are needed to impact cancer health disparities. In looking at next steps to keep the field on a steady and upward research trajectory, investigations must be driven not only by national imperatives but also by community need. To ensure the cultural and literacy relevancy of research, investigators should ask themselves the following basic questions as a barometer:

- *In what manner have I considered and included the “voices of the people” throughout the research process?*
- *In what way have I addressed culture and literacy in the design and development of materials, messages, programs, consents, and/or interventions? Are the words understood? Does the language fit the audience? Have I considered the everyday lives of the people?*
- *What types of partnerships could be formed to promote mutually beneficial goals? How will I ensure that the results and findings get back to the community?*

Ongoing attention to such questions will continue to fuel the development of a new culture of researchers that can further promote the development of culturally and literacy-sensitive cancer research.

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Coming Soon...

Starting in 2006, Cancer Control will include a new feature in the journal that focuses on articles about cancer, culture and literacy. Manuscripts of high interest include original research, research methods, reviews, advances in cancer prevention and control, educational developments, program evaluations and theorydevelopment that address the following themes:

- Health disparities
- Intersection of culture and literacy
- Community-based participatory methods
- Cancer education innovations
- Health policy

For more information or to submit a manuscript, contact the journal at cjournal@moffitt.usf.edu or Dr. Cathy Meade at cdmeade@moffitt.usf.edu.