Recognition and Addressing of Limited Pharmaceutical Literacy (RALPH): development of a screening tool for the pharmacy setting

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Background Recognition of patients with inadequate health literacy skills is difficult. Communication in the pharmacy is the last opportunity to ensure that patients understand how to use medicines correctly. Therefore insight in patients’ health literacy is of importance for the pharmacist.

Purpose To develop and validate an instrument (RALPH), suitable for use in daily pharmacy practice, that measures different aspects of health literacy necessary for correct medication use.

Method The RALPH-instrument consists of 12 questions in three health literacy domains: functional domain regarding reading and writing skills (three questions), communicative domain regarding skills to find/ask information and to assess concerns (four questions) and critical domain regarding skills to analyse information applicability and quality (four questions). The instrument is constructed to be completed as an interview. Data collection took place in community pharmacies’ waiting areas. Patients collecting their own medication were interviewed. Second, patients undergoing a medication review were interviewed using the RALPH-instrument. For these patients, additional questions about their medication use were asked by the pharmacist.

Findings In total, 274 patients were interviewed in the pharmacy waiting area and another 147 during medication review. First results show that in both groups approximately 12% of patients had troubles finding understandable medication information. Furthermore, 17% of the patients in the pharmacy waiting area and 24% of the medication review patients found it difficult to decide whether medication information applies to them. 24% of the medication review patients could not mention the (correct) indication for their own medication and about 10% did not know the correct dosage instructions.

Conclusion A substantial amount of medication users experiences difficulties in understanding instructions and finding (understandable) information about their medication. The RALPH-instrument may help pharmacists to identify these high-risk patients.