

## PANORAMA PEOPLE

### Interview with Jens Spahn, Federal Minister of Health, Germany



**Please explain to us why the creation of a health literacy programme is so important.**

Health literacy means more than simply asking Dr Google. Health literacy means being able to find medical information and comprehend, evaluate and put it into practice. Here we need to get better – Germany included. According to a recent study, more than half the German population has little or very limited health literacy. However, insufficient health literacy is also primarily a social problem because most of those who lack health literacy are older, have a low level of education or income, or are from a migrant background. Health literacy is therefore important for the cohesion of societies. Strengthening this ability is a political task.

Patients' well-being must be the decisive yardstick for health policy decision-making; patient orientation is the guiding principle for the health-care system as a whole. This is why, for the first time, the promotion of health literacy was included in the German Federal Government's Coalition Agreement. Furthermore, in forming the Health Quintet [Gesundheitsquintett], comprising the five German-speaking countries of Austria, Germany, Liechtenstein, Luxembourg and Switzerland, we agreed to join forces to make progress in promoting health literacy.

Increasing health literacy among the population benefits not only each individual patient but also anyone who bears responsibility in the health-care system. This is so because the more a patient knows about his/her own health, disease symptoms and treatment options, the more successful

treatment is likely to be. At the same time, a sound knowledge of health issues provides an important foundation for preventing the very emergence of certain diseases such as type 2 diabetes.

A lack of health literacy also has a financial impact. The OECD estimates that 3 to 5% of treatment costs in health-care systems could be saved or better utilized through greater health literacy. This would amount to approximately 9 to 15 billion euros per year in Germany alone.

In order to see decisive improvements in health literacy, it is imperative that people are reached in the settings in which they live. We are talking about people's everyday lives, about education and child raising, consumption and nutrition, living and working, the use of media, but also, of course, about greater comprehensibility in the exchange between doctors and patients. Precisely within this context, we observe that people with limited health literacy visit their doctors much more frequently. And we also observe that, when they are at the doctor's office (a consultation lasts for an average of eight minutes!) they often only really understand half of the information they are given. This is why shared decision-making, that is, having the doctor and the patient come to a mutual decision, is so important. This approach contributes decisively to the success of any treatment. It spares patients and relatives undue suffering. And that saves on health care costs.

**Please discuss some of the challenges you have faced in developing your nationwide health literacy strategy/plan.**

Given that the topic of health literacy is such a complex one, our policy responses to it must be equally multifaceted. When aiming to improve practical responses in people's everyday lives, it is imperative to have on board those health policy actors who are in a position to exert an influence in this area, in other words service providers, health insurance funds, patient representatives and naturally, also the policy-makers themselves.

This is why, two years ago, we worked together with the heads of the independent-administration [Selbstverwaltungen] within the German health-care system to launch the Alliance for Health Literacy. All 16 partners involved in the health-care system committed to developing new projects to improve health literacy in three different areas: First of all in health education, for example in childcare facilities, schools or enterprises. Secondly, in providing better, more comprehensible and practical information, especially via the internet and in the form of apps and other digital formats. Thirdly, by instilling better communication skills in health professionals in general and among doctors in particular. This primarily affects initial training, further training and continuing education.

Another important aim of this Alliance is incorporating more recent scientific knowledge into practice. In February 2018 a number of renowned scientists presented an evidence-based National Health Literacy Action Plan to the public outlining the key challenges and providing solutions to them. This is why, in this context, we also promote practice-oriented scientific projects that target particularly those groups that face greater problems with health literacy.

A key challenge in this context is digitalization. In Germany, at least 40 million people already resort to the internet for information on health topics and their numbers are growing rapidly. Two-thirds of the German population regularly perform a Google search on their diagnosis after a doctor's visit. The number of providers of health information on the internet is high but the quality of the information offered varies considerably. Misinformation and inaccurate self-diagnoses are very often the result. This is compounded by a growing market in commercially used health data, where users are frequently unable to tell how their personal data are used.

This is why we are working at full speed to create a national digital health portal. The portal is meant to ensure that citizens have quick, one-stop access to information on topics relating to health and long-term care that is reliable, devoid of advertisement and easily comprehensible. It is to be strictly designed according to the criteria of user orientation, transparency and data protection. As a result, it will close

a glaring gap in the supply of evidence-based health information and, as a result, will make a vital contribution to greater health literacy and patient orientation in the digital age.

### **How will the programme's success be measured; how will you know when your goals have been achieved?**

The *Alliance for Health Literacy* and the *National Health Literacy Action Plan* have set clear goals for themselves that will have to be reviewed continuously to determine the extent to which they have been or actually can be achieved. All measures, from the design of teaching plans through to increased education on medication therapy, and the development of discharge information that is comprehensible to laypeople, are being developed and evaluated at the same time. It is about more than just the health literacy of individuals; it is also, above all, about entire organizations. Indeed, it is only if a hospital prides itself on promoting health literacy across all areas that individual doctors will successfully arrive at the right decisions for all. This gives rise to questions such as: How can projects aimed at achieving greater health literacy in the relevant organizations – such as medical practices, hospitals, health insurance funds and patient self-help groups – be made especially effective? What can we do to better reach particularly disadvantaged population groups? And: what do we need to make our successes measurable so that lessons can be learned for the future?

We will be discussing the results, experiences and the impending challenges to strengthening health literacy with a wide range of experts at the major conference of the *Alliance for Health Literacy* and the *National Health Literacy Action Plan* in February next year. We do not intend to rest on our laurels, satisfied with our achievements thus far. The conference will elaborate concrete results to inform future action.

### **What has the public's reaction been to the health literacy strategy/plan?**

The other day, I attended the presentation of the Berlin Health Award. This institution has been around for roughly two decades and has become highly prestigious over the years. This year's theme was health literacy. I cite this example to illustrate how deeply the topic of health literacy has come to resonate with the public. No great surprise, since smart solutions directly help people with their everyday decision-making, but this year's award winners were the creators of the "Was hab' ich?" website, which loosely translates as "What did my doctor say?", and serve as a case in point. They came up with the idea of producing a doctor's note [Patientenbrief] any layperson can understand – an excellent idea indeed. At first, this might seem

like it should come with a heavy price tag, but if you combine human know-how and software smartly, it is not expensive at all. So, back in 2011, the award winners set up an internet platform that can translate incomprehensible medical reports; with doctors (and medical students) as the translators. The problem is that many people often do not understand what their discharge letter says, for instance when they go home from hospital, which sets them up for errors and mistakes. “*Was hab’ ich?*” lets you translate medical jargon into plain German. The creators have already compiled more than 10,000 text modules in layperson’s terms. The software automatically combines these into individual notes that explain, in detail, the patient’s condition and symptoms, the tests and examinations done and the medication prescribed. The resources required are modest, but the benefits are great since anyone can benefit. And the website’s success proves them right, because people are enthusiastically embracing the offer and making wide use of it.

Since the health-care system is becoming ever more complex, and unfortunately in many cases also more difficult to navigate, we need more health literacy. This is also reflected in a growing number of events, conferences, publications and digital services such as apps. Actually, we received about sixty applications from research facilities in response to our call for research proposals – a remarkable response rate. Health literacy is no longer a niche subject. And this is, in large part, thanks to digitalization. I want all members of the statutory health insurance in Germany to have the right to an electronic patient record, no later than 2021. We have now created the statutory basis for this. However, this also implies a greater need for information on all sides regarding the handling of data. In other words, we need more digital health literacy. Indeed, as evidenced by the example of “*Was hab’ ich?*”, digitalization creates ever more possibilities for improving health literacy. On the other hand, it also effectively requires more health literacy than before. All of those involved are aware that they will need to adapt. This is why we are seeing a surge in public attention regarding the topic. It is also what makes it so very important that technical and public media information are focused more strongly on plain language and users’ actual needs. This is the aim we seek to achieve with our national web-based health portal.

**How does Germany’s health literacy strategy/plan fit and work with the WHO Regional Office for Europe’s goals for health literacy?**

Many countries in the WHO European Region face similar challenges when it comes to boosting health literacy within their borders. For me, this is just one more reason to combine our activities in Germany with commitment at international level. That is what I am doing, for instance, in the context of the Health Quintet, the joint initiative of the five German-speaking health ministers. Austria, Germany, Liechtenstein, Luxembourg and Switzerland have committed themselves to making targeted and sustained efforts to advance health literacy in the interest of public health, strengthening their national health-care systems in the process. We wish to provide impetus. This is why the initiative sees itself as a catalyst within the WHO European Region, to get the topic of health literacy established even more firmly on its agenda.

One concrete success story is, for instance, the establishment of the Action Network on Measuring Population and Organizational health literacy (M-POHL). The network was formed in the context of the European Health Information Initiative (EHII) of the WHO European Region and took up its work in February last year. Comprised of experts working together to compare current health literacy levels across Europe on the basis of the 2012 European health literacy survey, the network meets regularly, for instance in August of this year (2019) in Berlin. The Federal Ministry of Health is lending financial and organizational support to conduct the corresponding follow-up survey for Germany. Such international networks are vital to bring the topic back to the public’s attention from time to time.

The alliance’s projects, the promotion of practice-oriented research, the development of a digital information portal and further steps to digitalize our health-care system make up a joint strategy for strengthening health literacy in Germany over the long term. This strategic interlocking of various approaches might also serve as a model in other countries within the WHO European Region. I would be delighted if this were the case.

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