

# Health Literacy Voices

## *Expert Insights*



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### **1. What is your vision for the field of health literacy?**

“I envision a future where health literacy isn’t seen as a specialty or an optional skill—it’s a core competency across all professions that touch health. Whether you’re a nurse, researcher, IT developer, public health leader, or policy maker, you will be trained to understand and prioritize health literacy from the start. It will be part of how we plan programs, design materials, build technology, and communicate with people—not something we fix after the fact. Health literacy will be embedded at the beginning of every interaction and every system.”

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### **2. What are your greatest concerns for the field?**

“I worry that health literacy continues to be treated as an optional add-on rather than a fundamental part of healthcare and public health systems. Too often, we end up talking to ourselves within the field, without making the systemic changes needed to embed health literacy into policies, funding priorities, and everyday practice. On top of that, I’m deeply concerned about the increasing political attacks on public health, science communication, and education. Efforts to provide clear, accessible, and equitable health information are being framed as partisan, when in reality they are about protecting lives and empowering communities. If we don’t push back—boldly and collectively—we risk losing ground not just in health literacy, but in the public’s fundamental trust in health systems.”

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### **3. Which historical or contemporary figure do you believe best represents the principles of health literacy?**

“For me, it’s my friend and colleague, Dr. Katelyn Jetelina. In the early days of the COVID-19 pandemic, she noticed that many around her were overwhelmed and confused by the rapidly changing information. To help, she began sending daily emails to her coworkers, breaking down complex scientific data into clear, understandable insights. What started as a simple effort to inform her immediate circle evolved into *Your Local Epidemiologist*, a widely respected newsletter that has reached hundreds of thousands of readers across the globe. Her dedication to making science accessible and combating misinformation didn’t go unnoticed—she was honored as one of TIME’s 2024 Most Influential People in Health.

Katelyn’s journey exemplifies the essence of health literacy: recognizing a gap in understanding and stepping up to bridge it with clarity, empathy, and expertise. Her work continues to empower individuals to make informed decisions about their health, and I’m continually inspired by her commitment to this vital cause.”

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### **4. What is the most misunderstood aspect of health literacy?**

“The biggest misunderstanding about health literacy is thinking it’s just about reading level. Health literacy is really about agency, equity, and design. It’s about giving people the power, knowledge, and ability to make informed decisions about their own health. It’s about whether people are truly invited into the healthcare conversation—whether systems are built to include them or shut them out—and whether they feel safe, respected, and informed enough to act.

At its heart, health literacy is about treating people with kindness, compassion, and respect, and recognizing that everyone is carrying things we may never see. It’s also about understanding that people’s brains work differently when they are scared or unwell. What I can process and understand when my family and I are safe is not the same as what I can handle when I’m sick or afraid for a loved one. Health literacy must meet people where they are, especially in their most vulnerable moments.”

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### **5. What is your favorite tool or resource to improve health literacy?**

“Currently, my favorite tool is AI—but not because it replaces human communication. I love AI because it can enhance what we do. It can help brainstorm ideas, simplify complex concepts, check for bias, model plain language, and even catch things like tone and reading level that we might miss when we’re moving fast. AI gives us a chance to slow down and be more intentional about how we communicate.

When used thoughtfully, AI is like having an extra set of hands—or an extra brain—dedicated to helping make information clearer, more inclusive, and more accessible. It’s not perfect, and it has to be guided carefully, but when you pair the expertise and empathy of a human communicator with the power of AI, it can be a game-changer for advancing health literacy at scale. It allows us to meet more people where they are, and to do it faster and better than we could ever do alone.”

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### **6. Where would you most like to see health literacy make an impact?**

“There are so many important areas where health literacy can make a difference, but right now, I’m especially focused on its role in the development of AI-powered programs. We’re seeing a huge wave of companies racing to build AI tools that generate health information, patient materials, and even clinical support resources. But in my experience, it’s often software developers and programmers leading the design—and health literacy just isn’t part of the conversation. In almost every discussion I’ve had with the people behind these projects, they’ve admitted that understanding how patients perceive and use the information isn’t really on their radar. That’s a huge gap—and a huge risk. If we don’t make health literacy a core part of how these tools are built, we’ll only widen the communication gaps we’re already fighting to close. I’d love to see more people from the health literacy field stepping into these conversations early, shaping the design of AI programs, and making sure that clear, equitable, and human-centered communication is treated as essential—not optional.”

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### **7. How do you handle setbacks or resistance in health literacy initiatives?**

“I remind myself (and others) that progress isn’t always linear. I focus on small wins, celebrate when people begin to “get it,” and build relationships that create long-term change.”

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### 8. How do you define success in health literacy?

“I define success in health literacy as that moment when someone not only understands the information but feels like it was meant for them. It’s when a person feels seen, respected, and empowered to make decisions about their own health. Success isn’t just about someone reading a pamphlet or understanding a discharge summary—it’s about them recognizing that the information is clear, relevant, and offered with compassion. It’s when communication moves people from confusion to confidence, especially those who are often left out or overlooked.

Real success happens when people feel like they were invited into the conversation, not talked down to or left to figure it out on their own.”

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### 9. What innovation—whether technological, policy-related, or educational—do you believe holds the most promise for improving health literacy?

“OK, so I’m the AI expert—and I know that definitely colors how I’m viewing the field right now. But I truly believe that AI, when used thoughtfully, holds incredible promise for improving health literacy.

Imagine if plain language, cultural sensitivity, accessibility, and emotional tone were built right into the tools we already use—electronic health records, patient education platforms, even public health messaging systems. AI can help check readability, flag jargon, suggest clearer phrasing, and tailor materials for different audiences—not just once, but consistently, across everything we create.

The real power is that it won’t just help health literacy specialists do their jobs better. It will help everyone—doctors, nurses, IT teams, administrators, public health leaders—communicate more clearly and inclusively without needing to be experts in health literacy themselves. It creates a baseline of better communication across the board.

If we do it right, AI could help shift health systems from ones that unintentionally exclude people to ones that intentionally welcome and empower them at every step.”

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## **10. If you could shape the future of health literacy, what is one transformative change you would implement?**

“If I could make one transformative change, it would be to make clear, inclusive communication the standard everywhere health education happens—not just in patient handouts, but in videos, social media posts, hospital signage, community events, and anywhere else people might get health information.

And it’s not just about the words we use. It’s about the images we choose, the tone we set, and the assumptions we make about who is in the room—or who should be. Health literacy should be built into every piece of communication from the beginning, across every format and platform, because people find health information in so many places we don’t always expect.

When we think about health literacy as something woven through all of our touchpoints—not as a box to check—we can start building a system that truly meets people where they are and respects the many different ways they access, process, and act on health information.”