



UMB News

Clear Language Policy Essential to Health Literacy

February 23, 2021 | By [Laura Lee](#)

The greatest predictor of an individual's health status is their health literacy skill — the ability to understand basic health information needed to make well-informed health decisions. The American Medical Association reports that 75 percent of patients who reported being in poor health also tested poorly in health literacy.



Jocelyn Wang, 2L, is a 2020-2021 President's Fellow.

of Maryland, College Park in a yearlong interprofessional research project to explore health literacy as a social determinant of health.

This year's topic centers on expanding the University's role in improving the relationship between provider and patient, therefore, allowing patients to be well-informed and active decision-makers in their health and the health of their families.

And while personal health literacy plays an important role in healthy outcomes, organizational health literacy — the degree to which service providers communicate clearly and provide tools for patients to make informed health-related decisions — is equally important.

Health literacy is a consideration for nearly every student at the [University of Maryland, Baltimore](#) (UMB), whose mission is to improve the human condition through education, research, clinical care, and service. That's why the 2020-2021 [President's Symposium and White Paper Project](#) is engaging nine students from the schools of dentistry, law, medicine, nursing, pharmacy, social work, and public health from UMB and the University

On Feb. 9, Christopher R. Trudeau, JD, associate professor at the University of Arkansas at Little Rock's Bowen School of Law, spoke to students as part of the President's Symposium Series, a collection of talks designed to unravel the various factors that make health literacy a social determinant of health. Trudeau, a leading expert in the legal aspects of health literacy in clinical and research settings, was eager to share his thoughts on how to support health literacy through law and policy change.

A passionate proponent of clear language and what he called "health understanding," Trudeau examined during his hourlong talk how providers can use regulatory trends in health literacy to advocate for changes within their own organizations.

"We know that people struggle with forms and processes," said Trudeau, who published the first U.S. study measuring the public's preferences for legal communication in 2012. A lawyer himself, he lamented how informed consent forms are "written by lawyers for lawyers," and are often incomprehensible to the patient signing on the dotted line.

"The typical informed consent form is unreadable for any level of reading," he continued. This presents a problem that Trudeau believes can be solved — in part — at the policy level.

The regulatory push for health literacy is a global movement that has been on the agenda of the World Health Organization for nearly two decades. Several countries have national health literacy policies including China, New Zealand, Australia, and Scotland.

The United States is making progress in this arena by mandating clear language in government communication. Trudeau pointed to the 2010 passage of the Plain Writing Act, which requires federal agencies such as the Social Security Administration, Veterans Health Administration, and the Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services to use "clear government communication that the public can understand and use."

He suggested leaning on such policies when initiating changes to health care communication on an organizational level. "No matter what you're trying to do," he said, "you're going to find some policy statement on a federal level and on a state level that supports what you're doing."

Jocelyn Wang, 2L, is a President's Fellow working on the health literacy project. She said Trudeau's policy talk rang especially true to her as a law student and will add another dimension to the recommendations she and her peers include in their White Paper presentation to the University community in April. "We will definitely be implementing the information he provided about how health literacy policies positively impact the patient and the service provider into our suggestions," she said.

The President's Symposium and White Paper Project is a joint initiative of the [President's Office](#) and the [Intercultural Center](#). Past White Papers have explored Implementing Core Values, Addressing Gun Violence, and Global Literacy.

The next talk in the White Paper Symposium Series takes place March 8 during which University System of Maryland Chancellor **Jay A. Perman, MD**, will moderate a panel of nationally recognized experts in health literacy. Register [here](#).

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