



Submission to the Department of Health and Aged Care

National Health Literacy Strategy Framework Consultation

Prepared by

COTA Australia

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COTA Australia

COTA Australia is the national consumer peak body representing older people. The COTA Federation has over 45,000 individual members and supporters and works with a network of seniors' organisations, which jointly engage the diversity of over 500,000 older Australians.

Speaking for the nearly nine million Australians over 50 years old COTA Australia prioritises economic, social, and political participation of older Australians and challenging ageism. The diversity of older Australians gives COTA Australia a broad policy agenda, currently we are prioritising policies about retirement incomes, aged care, housing, elder abuse, older workers, digital inclusion, health, and social isolation. It advocates within government, business, and society maintaining effective relationships, and is respected as a legitimate, influential voice.

COTA Australia promotes integrity, diversity, promoting equality, and prioritises collaborative engagement. With a membership including State and Territory Councils on the Ageing, COTA Australia has been identifying the needs of, issues affecting, and welfare of older Australians since it was first formed in 1951.

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The Council on the Ageing (COTA) Australia welcomes the opportunity to provide comment on the Consultation Paper: Development of the National Health Literacy Strategy (Strategy) August 2022. We appreciate the Department of Health's commitment to employing a wide and diverse range of approaches to facilitating stakeholder engagement in the Strategy's development. Our aim in contributing to Phase 1 of this iterative process, is to support the voices of older people to shape the ongoing work in this critical health space.

Our Findings

Our engagement with older people consistently reinforces, as frequent users of Australia's health system, they want enhanced self-efficacy in relation to the health care they receive. They want to be informed decision makers. Older people want to be assured their views and beliefs are respected and they are listened to as active partners in their health and support. Further, they consider their immersion in a reliable and trusted health literate environment as being integral to facilitating this outcome. However, despite the explosion of readily available health information (hard copy and online), they tell us they frequently experience being excluded from influencing the direction of their health care. Except at the cursory level, are their views, beliefs and attitudes given any credence.

Older people are resolute - health literacy matters. They know it impacts their capacity to understand and engage confidently with health professionals, influences their lifestyle behaviours and most significantly, profoundly influences health and wellbeing. The message we often hear for older people is that *I am tired of being patronised and listened to passively or as a courtesy. I want ownership and control of my health and wellbeing.* We are regularly contacted by older people advising of the highly complex technical, alienating language used by many medical and health professionals, as well as of the medical bureaucratic/legalese of hospital documentation and medication leaflets. These emails and discussions are from people from all walks of life.

Placing People at the Centre

COTA Australia acknowledges the importance of the proposed Strategy in focusing on individuals at the centre of their health care and support. We know this complements the view held by older people. We appreciate the Strategy will be a critical support underpinning the success of the National Preventive Health Strategy 2021-2030 (NPHS) and, more particularly, in facilitating enhanced health equity. Further, we suggest that once finalised, the lessons learnt in developing the Strategy inform the analytical groundwork for related whole-of-stakeholder, educative strategies especially within and across the primary health care sector.

A National Approach

We applaud the development of a national approach. We support the view that the development of a consistent overarching framework will facilitate others - jurisdictions, local communities and services - to resource the maintenance of a coordinated, current and 'individually' tailored library of health literacy materials. We acknowledge and reinforce the importance of respecting and responding meaningfully to individual's/ groups'/local communities' differing abilities to understand, critically appraise and demonstrate health literacy competency.

The overarching national document is essential to providing a systematic, evidence-based, conceptual schema and common language. The Strategy, with its recognition of wide community/individual variations, provides a well-considered intellectual scaffold to guide and inform the development of 'localised' strategies and approaches to health literacy. We understand this as being fundamental to extending the latitude for individuals to be more empowered in managing their health, as well as their interactions with health practitioners. This will increase the potential for a more ongoing collaborative approach to achieving optimal health and wellbeing outcomes for individuals and the wider community, as well as reduce people's need for more expensive health treatments.

The Vision

COTA Australia supports the Strategy's vision. However, we believe its principal statement needs to be strengthened. In addition to identifying the relationship between health literacy and informed decision making, we believe it is imperative the principal statement 'authorises' how decisions are heard and acted on is an equally integral component of the health literacy equation. For the Strategy to gain traction and potency it must unfold in a consumer empowered health literate receptive environment. Therefore, we suggest the vision be reworded to state **Australians are informed health decision makers and respectfully acknowledged as care partners.**

We appreciate this is made more explicit in the elaboration of the Vision. Nevertheless, it is our view it needs to be expressed as part of the principal statement.

The Objectives

COTA Australia endorses the Strategy's primary objective (as outlined in the Background to the Strategy). We appreciate the emphasis on the development of an evidence-based, literacy environment (rather than placing the onus on individuals) and the use of unambiguous health information descriptors. These will ensure the Strategy's inclusivity without compromising its core integrity when operationalised at various community/individual levels.

Minor changes we would like to see incorporated are:

- dot point one, ... information and how to **apply this to managing ...**
- dot point three, change 'allow' to '**enable**'
- dot point four, separate into two workforce related statements (both need to be highlighted)
- dot point five, include **older people** as a priority population
- In relation to the stated outcome, we suggest the following additions
 - improved navigation **and knowledge** of ...
 - **enhanced individual choice and control** (alternatively, sense of personal agency)
 - improved **relational care**, service delivery **and health outcomes**

The Framework

COTA Australia acknowledges the diagrammatic representation of the framework presents a reasonably clear understanding of what the Strategy attempts to achieve. We believe the Principles for Action have been comprehensively captured. Without wanting to diminish the importance of any of the Principles for Action, older Australians will especially welcome the emphasis given to acknowledging that health literacy is a dynamic personal space and an individual's health literacy needs and skills are generally different at each stage of life. We also appreciate the recognition that the publication of the Strategy is not an end. We fully endorse the need for further investment in interventional and translational health literacy research.

Our comment regarding the Vision is expressed above.

In relation to the Aims, we appreciate the succinct statements but believe this has been achieved at the expense of critical terms that if left omitted could result in misunderstanding.

Our suggestions are.

- Aim 1: insert **and trusted** after effective. This is critical
- Aim 2: include **age** before appropriate
- Aim 3: prior to use insert **appraise**

COTA Australia has long advocated for a stronger focus on the development of an evidence-based, person-centred health literate environment. From our discussions with older people, we are confident of the value in applying adult learning principles to health care. We know that given the social determinants of health, these coupled with purposeful, multileveled political, policy, service and professional leadership will enable the flourishing of health literate individuals and responsive service environments. As a result, the potential for win-win situations is expanded. Individuals are knowingly more confident in better managing their own/family health. Plus, when needed, they are more likely to engage proactively in empowered, effective decision-making processes with health professionals and care teams. In addition, the health care paradigm increases its shift from one of disease and crisis intervention to promotion, prevention and early intervention.

We welcome the publication of the draft version of the Strategy in early 2023. Again, thank you for the opportunity to provide comment on the Strategy's Consultation Paper.