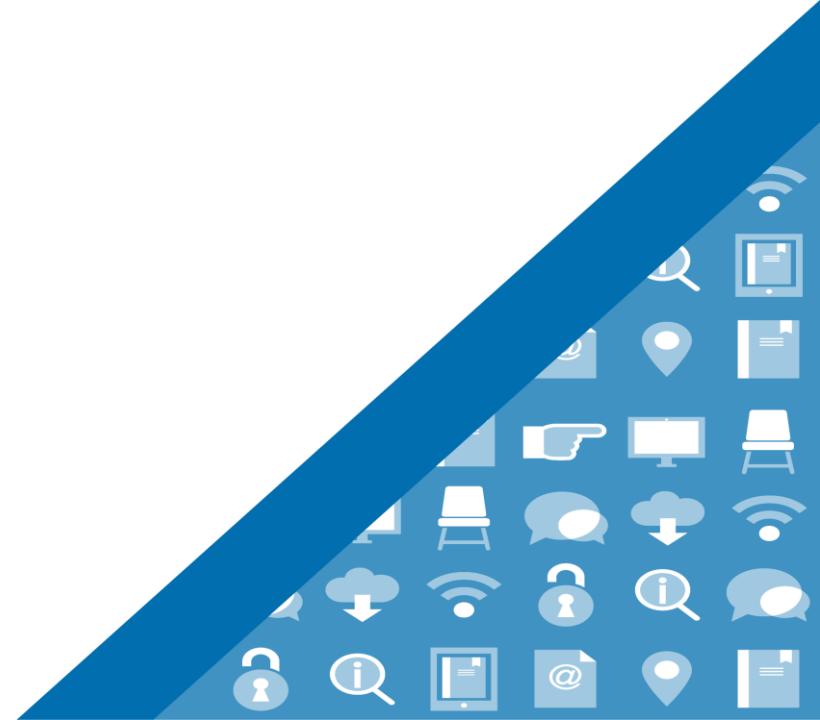


# An Introduction to Health Literacy

Phillip Barlow



# Aims and Objectives

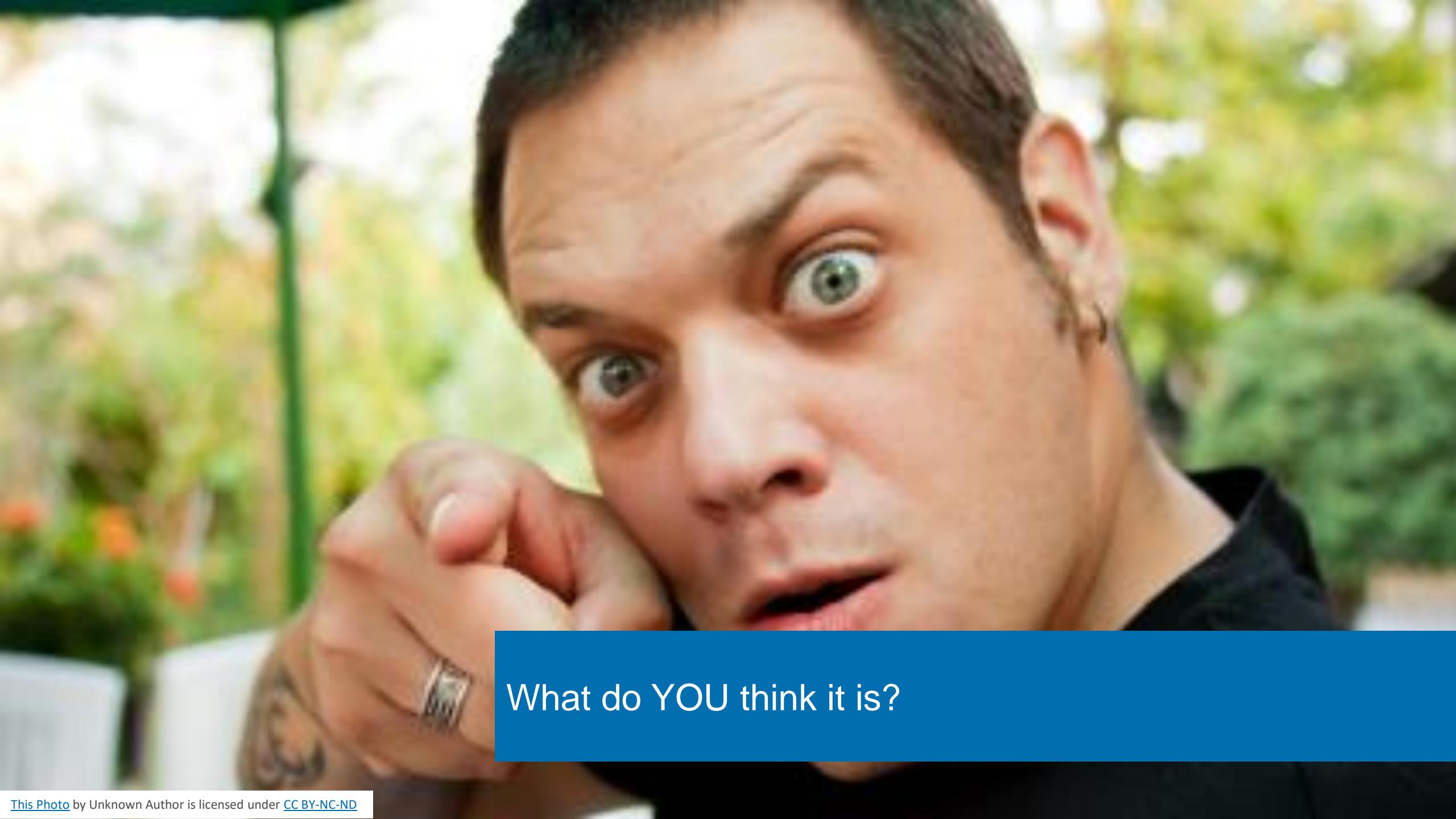
- To raise the understanding and knowledge of what health literacy is and why it is important
- To explore information resources that can support patients with health related enquiries
- To increase confidence and awareness when dealing with health literacy and patient information enquiries

## About us

- Supporting NHS staff with their information and research needs
- Promote health literacy and public patient information
- Not public facing
- Work with those who work with the public/ patients to support health literacy and robust health information



So, what is health literacy?



What do YOU think it is?

# What is health literacy?

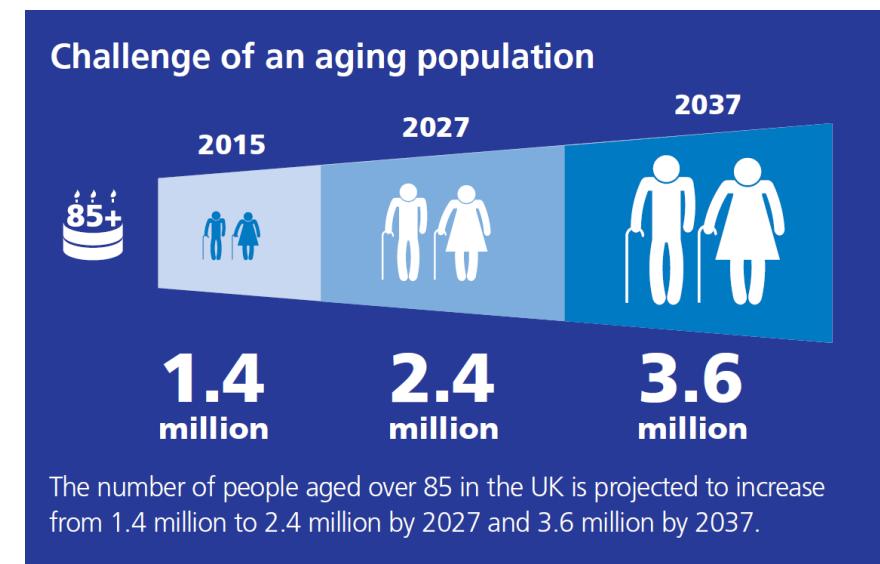
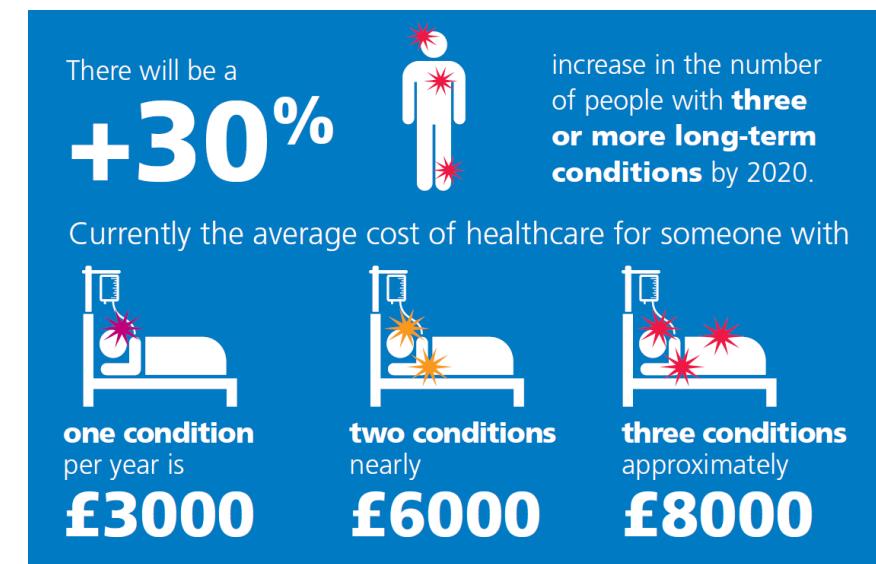
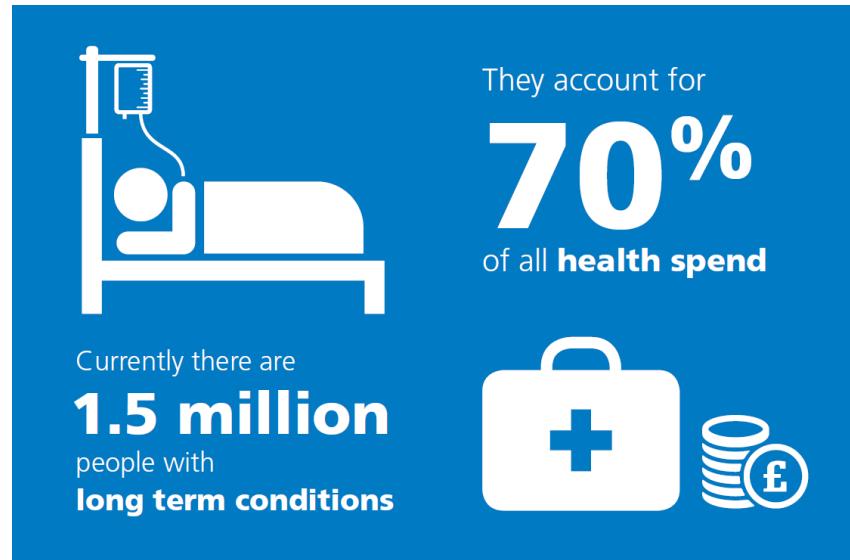
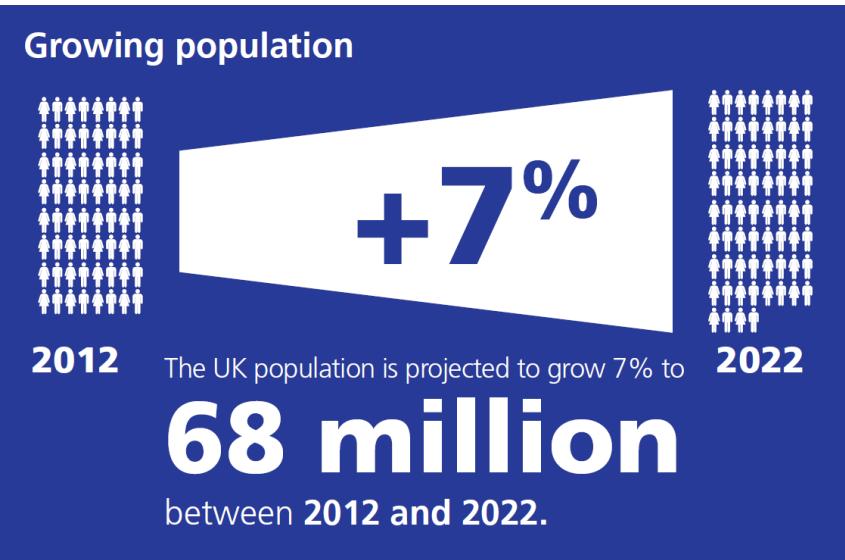
“The personal characteristics and social resources needed for individuals and communities to access, understand, appraise and use information and services to make decisions about health”

World Health Organisation, 2015

Source – Health Literacy Toolkit for Low- and Middle-Income Countries

<https://apps.who.int/iris/handle/10665/205244>

# Why is health literacy important?



# Why is health literacy important?

**42% of working-age adults** in England are unable to understand and make use of everyday health information

**61% of England's working-age population** find health materials containing both text and figures too complex to understand

**43% of working-age adults** in England struggle to understand instructions to calculate a childhood paracetamol dose

Public Health England, 2015

Source: Improving health literacy to reduce health inequalities

<http://www.healthliteracyplace.org.uk/media/1239/hl-and-hi-ucl.pdf>

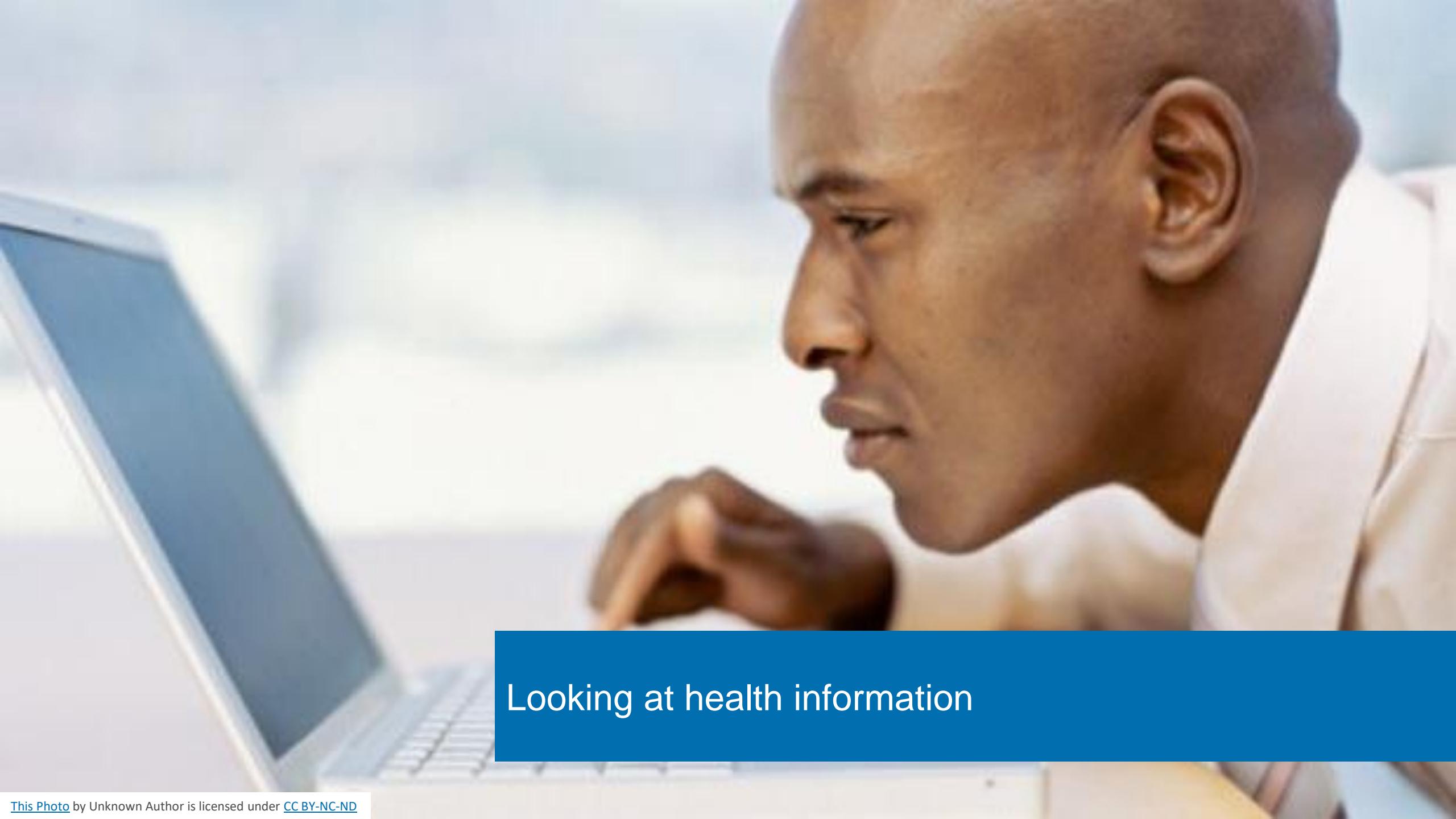
# Better health literacy = Better outcomes

## Patients

- Informed choices about their health
- Better management of long term conditions
- More engagement with preventative health measures

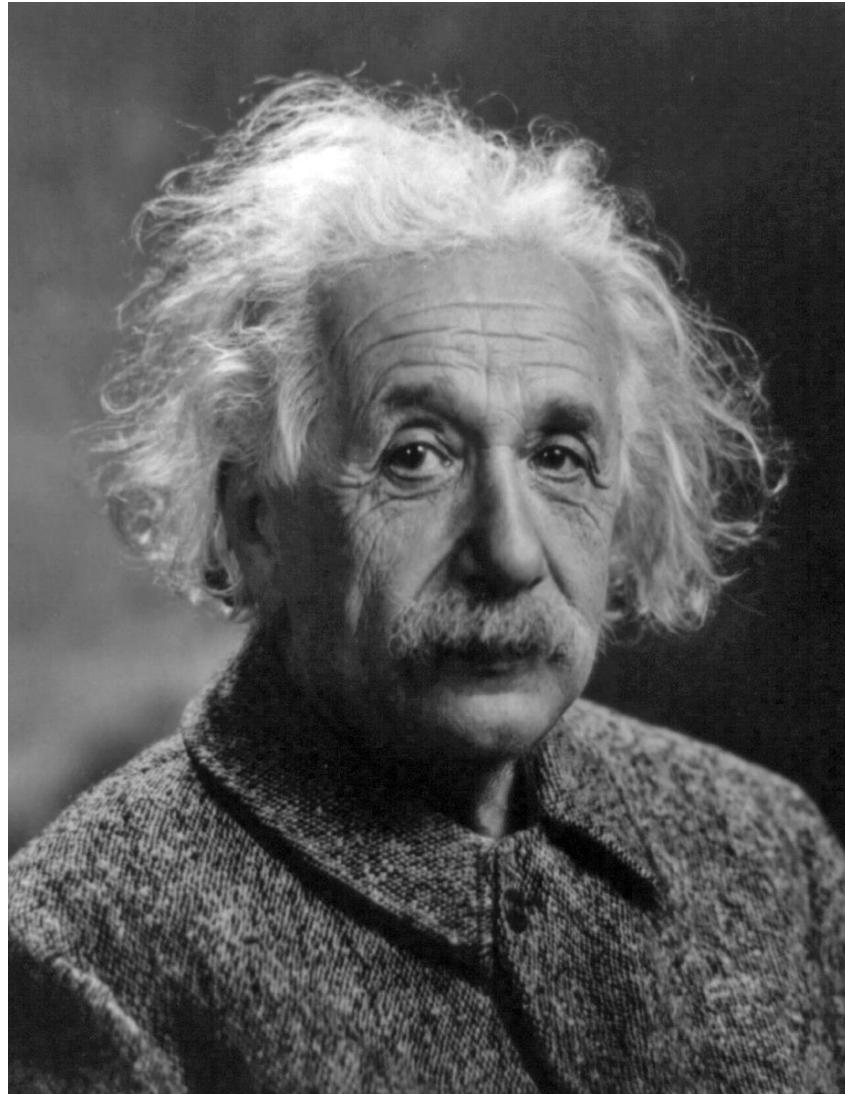
## NHS

- Less strain on NHS services, including emergency services
- Less cost to the NHS



Looking at health information

# Looking at health information



“Information is not knowledge”  
Albert Einstein

# Looking at health information

“True genius resides in the capacity for evaluation of... information”

Winston Churchill



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# Looking at health information



“The two words 'information' and 'communication' are often used interchangeably, but they signify quite different things. Information is giving out; communication is getting through”

Sydney J. Harris



Discussion

# Looking at health information

Evaluate the printed health information and think about the following questions:

- How easy is it to understand?
- How clear is its purpose?
- How clear are the instructions?

But also:

- What is good about it?
- What could be improved about it?

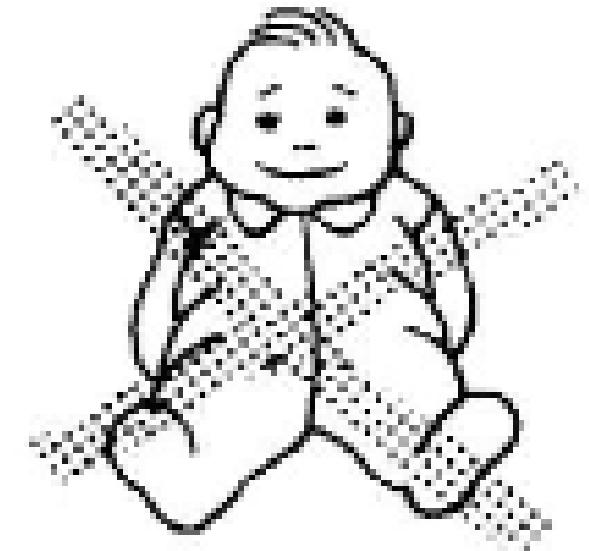
- How easy is it to understand?
- How clear is its purpose?
- How clear are the instructions?
- What is good about it?
- What could be improved about it?



# Looking at health information

## Images

- Images can be drawings, photographs or other images
- Images should support the meaning of the words
- Images must be easy to understand
- Make images as big as possible





Dr Google will see you now



**“More and more patients are going to the Internet  
for medical advice. To keep my practice going,  
I changed my name to Dr. Google.”**

# Professor Trisha Greenhalgh



- Professor of Primary Health Care at Green Templeton College, Oxford
- Senior investigator at the National Institute for Health Research
- Practicing GP
- Author of 220 peer-reviewed articles and eight textbooks
- Wrote *How to Read a Paper* – the gold-standard work on how to assess research papers

## Levels change

“I’m a professor, yet the first thing I did was I put ‘breast cancer’ into Google... because you’re frightened.”

Trisha Greenhalgh



Trisha Greenhalgh ✨  
@trishgreenhalgh



Library services are using this quote from me to advertise their searching courses. Based on a true story, forgivable in the circumstances.

A Google search is NOT the way to find information systematically. Get proper training from a librarian.

Thanks to a follower for sending



# Dr Tullio Simoncini

- Former physician and oncology specialist
- Left medical practice to set up himself
- Claimed cancer caused by a fungus and could be cured by use of sodium bicarbonate
- Jailed twice for fraud, and also charged with manslaughter

# Baking Soda Cancer Treatment (Sodium Bicarbonate)

by [Colleen Huber, NMD](#)

[Home](#) > Baking Soda Cancer Treatment (Sodium Bicarbonate)

## Does the Baking Soda Cancer Treatment aka (Sodium Bicarbonate) Work?

[Colleen Huber, NMD](#)

Dr. Tullio Simoncini is a medical doctor in Italy who has done more than anyone to explore the uses of the baking soda cancer treatment as an alternative cancer treatment. It is known that cancer creates and favors an acid environment and because of this, Dr. Simoncini and others have used sodium bicarbonate as an alkaline therapeutic agent.

The way that acidity seems to protect cancer is not fully understood. It seems that cytotoxic T-cells, which may attack cancer cells under normal conditions, are inactivated in



# Dr Google will see you now

Increasing numbers of people use the web to find information:

- In 2013 – 72% of American internet users said they had used the web to research a medical condition.
- Of those, 77% said that they had started their inquiry using a search engine.

Pew Research Center

Source: Health Online 2013

<http://www.pewinternet.org/2013/01/15/health-online-2013/>

Important to ensure that what patients find is good quality:

- We call it “critical appraisal”
- More simply it is assessing information

Dr Google will see you now

## Checklist for assessing information on websites

Who wrote it?  
Who are they?

When was it written?

Are there promises or guarantees?

Does the author(s) have a particular agenda or belief?

What is the country of origin?

Who is it written for?  
Who does the author pitch the information at?

# Using websites for patient information

**There are tried and tested websites for robust, assessed public/ patient information:**

- NHS.uk – NHS created website, kept up to date, and with information specifically for the public. Includes NHS apps, and Behind the Headlines news service
- Patient.info – created by GPs for specifically for patients
- Healthtalk.org – patient experiences with videos. New information added all the time
- BMJ Best Practice – clinical decision support tool that also includes information written specifically for patients



**Patient**  
Trusted medical information and support



**BMJ**  
Best Practice

# Ensuring good quality

## Trusted Information Creator

- Developed by Patient Information Forum (PIF) to support production of high quality information
- Organisations have robust process based on best practice to produce information that meets the needs of end users
- PIF has a set of criteria – quality statements to reflect what ‘high quality’ means.



# Ensuring good quality

## PIF TICK Scheme

Certification scheme developed by PIF to help patients and public make informed choices.

Serves as a 'quality filter' to help people decide what information is trustworthy, and indicates an organisation is a reliable source of health information.

Organisations displaying the PIF TICK have undergone assessment to ensure information is clear, accurate and up to date, and meets the PIF Criteria.

<https://pifonline.org.uk/pif-tick/>



# Ensuring good quality

## The Crystal Mark

Certification scheme developed by Plain English Campaign to ensure written documents are clear and easy to understand.

Documents must fulfil a number of criteria, including use of everyday English, conciseness, and clear and helpful headings.

Individually numbered Crystal Marks for individual documents.





## Communication

# Communication

A total of 15% of adults in England are below the “functional” level for literacy, and 24% are below the level for numeracy.

The majority of adults fall into the 11-14 reading age group, and have numeracy skills equivalent to a nine-year old.

You need to make sure that the information you communicate to people is at an appropriate level for the majority of people to understand

# Teach Back

A confirmation method where you can confirm that the patient understands what they have been told

If they understand, they can 'teach back' the information they have been given

This demonstrates that the patient has heard and understands clearly what you have told them, but also that you have explained it in a way that they understand clearly

# Verbal communication

“We discussed a lot today. Can you tell me what you found most important?”

“To check that I’ve explained everything properly, can you explain to me how you are going to take your medicines?”

“Just to make sure that my instructions make sense to you, can you tell me what you are going to do next?”

# Verbal communication

Using 'Teach Back' is an excellent way of ensuring that people understand the information they have given, so you can use it as a matter of routine with everyone

## Using 'Teach Back' – some examples

-  I would like to check that I have explained things properly, would you mind telling me what it is we have discussed and what we have agreed you will do?
-  Can you tell me how you are going to explain things to your family when you get home tonight?
-  I want to make sure you have understood, can you tell me what I've asked you to do?
-  Have you understood everything we have discussed?

# Chunk and check

Use in conjunction with  
'teach back'

Break down the  
information into small  
'chunks' – after each one,  
check that the patient  
understands, using 'teach  
back' where appropriate

# Universal precautions

Don't assume that people you're giving information to will understand what you are telling them

Make sure you have good communication skills, and where necessary modify your own practice to make them better

‘Principles of Communication’ – e-Learning for Healthcare module

# Communication

In March 2019, the NHS announced plans to use simplified words on its website:

- 'Stools/faeces' → 'poo'
- 'Urine' → 'pee'
- 'Oral' → 'mouth'
- 'Nausea' → 'feeling sick'
- 'Vomiting' → 'being sick'
- 'Fever' → 'high temperature'
- 'Haemorrhage' → 'very heavy bleed'

Pulse, 2019

Source – NHS website will simplify words to avoid confusion with patients

<http://www.pulsetoday.co.uk/news/gp-topics/it/nhs-website-will-simplify-words-to-avoid-confusion-with-patients/20038401.article>

'We know some people think we shouldn't use words like "pee" and "poo", but we haven't seen anyone have problems knowing what we mean. Most importantly, if someone with poor literacy understands "blood in your poo", it might just save their life.'

Sara Wilcox, content designer, NHS.UK

## Abraar Karan: Making sure patients understand and that doctors do too

May 23, 2019

*Abraar Karan considers a case that made him confront how much is lost or misunderstood in doctor-patient communication*

"Why am I here?" Mrs S looked up at me for the first time since I had entered the room and begun speaking to her. I had spent the past five minutes talking about the need for her to start new medications for her heart failure. She had nodded along for most of the conversation, but I wondered if she had heard, or more importantly understood, anything I had been saying. She had had three admissions for heart failure exacerbation in the past few months. And yet, she looked at me and said, "Do I have heart problems? No one ever told me?"

In that moment, I had to ask myself what had gone wrong in her care. Could it actually have been that no one ever told her about the problem with her heart? That seemed unlikely, even for a bunch of overworked doctors. Maybe, I questioned, her diagnosis hadn't been explained in terms she could understand? Many days, I supervise interns and medical students, and not uncommonly they are entangled in medical language that goes over most patients' heads. A major learning process for trainees is understanding how best to communicate in so-called laymen's terms while still sharing all the necessary information.

Although many patients are well informed and knowledgeable about their health, the reality is that a lot of patients have low health literacy—particularly those who are older, from immigrant or minority populations in which English isn't a first language, or from low income or low educational backgrounds. Estimates suggest that low health literacy, and the failure to address it, cost the US economy anywhere from \$100 to 200 billion, annually.

Nonetheless, as her doctor, I felt disappointed—had we as a medical system collectively failed to communicate effectively?

Comment and opinion from The BMJ's international community of readers, authors, and editors

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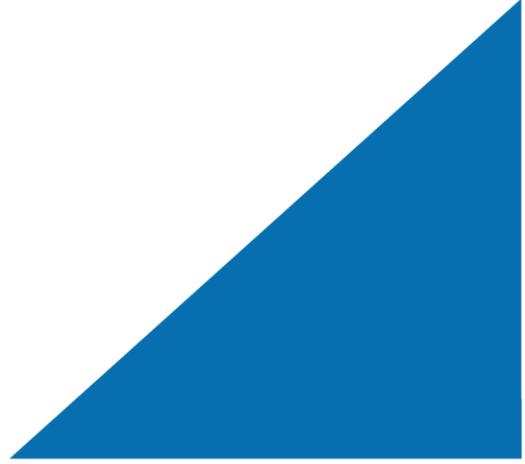
Brexit

**Karan, A, 2019**

Source – Making sure patients understand and that doctors do too

<https://blogs.bmj.com/bmj/2019/05/23/abraar-karan-making-sure-patients-understand-and-that-doctors-do-too/>

Any questions?



## Useful resources

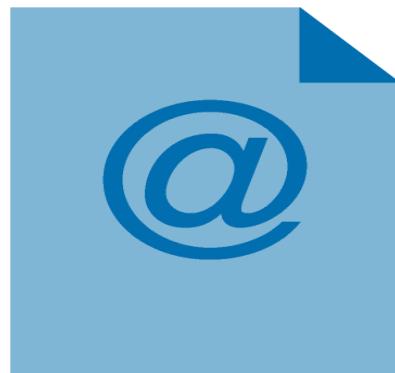
- Health Education England – Health Literacy Toolkit
- <https://www.hee.nhs.uk/our-work/health-literacy>
- NHS Scotland – The Health Literacy Place
- <http://www.healthliteracyplace.org.uk/>
- E-Learning for Healthcare – Principles of Communication
- [http://cs1.e-learningforhealthcare.org.uk/public/END/END\\_03\\_003/d/ELFH\\_Session/453/session.html?lms=n#radio\\_495.html](http://cs1.e-learningforhealthcare.org.uk/public/END/END_03_003/d/ELFH_Session/453/session.html?lms=n#radio_495.html)
- BMJ Best Practice – Patient Information Leaflets
- <https://bestpractice.bmj.com/patient-leaflets>

# Summary

- What health literacy is and why it is important
- Explore information resources that can support patients with health related enquiries
- Examined how to assess the quality of information resources
- Looked at how we communicate directly with patients, and how that can be improved

All of which will hopefully increase your confidence and when dealing with health literacy and patient information enquiries

# Thank you



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