



University of Zurich

Institute for Social and Preventative Medicine

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The Institute for Social and Preventive Medicine at the University of Zurich (ISPMZ) presents its results on regional differences in health literacy in Switzerland.

New results confirm the potential for developing health literacy in Switzerland.

The Institute for Social and Preventive Medicine at the University of Zurich (ISPMZ) is for the first time presenting representative data concerning health literacy in the three linguistic regions of Switzerland (German-speaking Switzerland, French-speaking Switzerland and the Canton of Ticino). In all three regions, citizens wish to take an active part. In Ticino, decisions relating to health seem more complex: the information available is harder to decipher. On the other hand, the people of the Canton of Ticino are, according to the survey, the most cost-aware. In all three linguistic regions, people are dissatisfied with doctor/patient communication. Dissatisfaction with the range of treatment options offered by doctors is patently obvious.

"We wanted to find out if there were differences in the health literacy of citizens in the three main linguistic regions of Switzerland, and whether such regional differences corroborated existing knowledge," said Jen Wang, the legal assistant on ISPMZ, explaining the in-depth study. The survey took the form of 1,250 telephone interviews each with 150 questions. From April to May, a total of 1,250 inhabitants aged 15 years and above were questioned (650 interviews in German-speaking Switzerland, 300 in both the French speaking part and in Ticino).

Problems with doctor-patient communication

In all regions communication with doctors was unsatisfactory for the majority of patients. 45% of German-speaking Swiss said that their doctor had explained the advantages and disadvantages of treatment to them adequately and in a way which they could understand. The figure for French speakers was similar (43%). In Ticino, however, it was only 29%.



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Particularly striking were the answers to the question of whether doctors had offered patients different treatment options. In German-speaking Switzerland, 28% answered in the affirmative to this question, in Western Switzerland 21%, and in Ticino only 12%. Almost all those surveyed wanted to be actively involved in the choice of treatment (G-Swiss: 86%, F-Swiss: 82%, I-Swiss: 75%).

Italian-speaking Swiss most aware of costs

The results in Ticino were striking: the Italian-speaking Swiss were very much aware that their choice of service had an effect on costs, and throughout Switzerland they were most receptive to financial incentives to use medical services more carefully. On the other hand, potential was greater in Ticino than anywhere else in Switzerland for making health information more accessible in terms of the choice of correct treatment and choice of health insurance schemes. 36% of Italian-speaking Swiss found health information in the media difficult to understand. In the French-speaking region, 26% of those asked experienced difficulties, and in German-speaking Switzerland this figure was 22%.

Education has effect on mortality

Jen Wang and his team found that the differences in the results corresponded with other investigations: *"It's not about criticising different levels of education. Rather, the results show that education represents a key factor even in healthcare, and that the corresponding potential should be exploited."*

The significance of education in the health sector was particularly apparent in a study by the ISPMZ using data from the Swiss National Cohort; among men aged between 25 and 29 who attended compulsory education, the risk of death was more than three times as high as with those of the same age who had been to university. With older men and women, the relative differences in risk were somewhat less, but they did not disappear even in the uppermost age ranges.

Swiss want to be more involved in discussions

One finding from the latest ISPMZ survey is particularly interesting, and is evident throughout all three language regions: more than half



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of the citizens of our country want to be more involved in political decisions. They are also more aware of costs than many politicians would lead us to believe.

Jen Wang drew a positive and encouraging conclusion from these analyses: *"Health literacy can be taught and learnt. Tests among the chronically sick have shown that the development of health literacy in patients can lead to increased quality of life and even to a reduction in the use of medical services – and hence lower costs. More importantly, citizens want to play an active part. It could therefore be time to work together in the different areas, thus promoting not only health literacy but also quality of life in general in our community."*

((Box))

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Taking the podium at the media conference:

- Bea Heim, National Council Member SP
- Felix Gutzwiller, National Council Member FDP,
Chairman of the Institute for Social and Preventive Medicine, University of Zurich
- Franziska Troesch-Schnyder, President of the Konsumentenforum
- Fritz Britt, Director *santésuisse*
- Ilona Kickbusch, Professor HEI, University of Geneva
- Ursula Ulrich, Leader of the Health Policy Department *ad interim*,
Swiss Federal Office for Public Health

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