

Health Literacy

Helping you write clear communications



Volume 2, Issue 2
June 2008

Asthma Health Literacy Study Wins Award

Here's some great news. Aetna has been recognized for our work to improve poor health literacy. The award comes from The Institute of Healthcare Advancement. It was for our Asthma Health Literacy Study.

More than 18,000 members with asthma were invited to join the study. The study has three goals:

- Increase member knowledge about asthma
- See if members can remember the new information
- Find out if better knowledge leads to better health

People who have trouble reading have a hard time making decisions about their health. This makes

it hard for them to follow their treatment plan. And good treatment is vital in caring for asthma.

People with poor health literacy and asthma may be less likely to know:

- How harmful asthma can be
- The warning signs of asthma
- How to control their asthma

Members in the study were split into two groups. One group gets the same care from their doctors that they always have. The other group gets this same care plus a packet of materials written in plain language.

The study isn't over yet, but the results so far have been good. Those getting the easy-to-read packet show a big advance in their knowledge of asthma.

Our "research" award shows the value of this study. The work we are doing on health literacy is helping our members.

Thank you,



Troy Brennan, MD,
Chief Medical Officer



Jill Griffiths,
Head of Business
Communications

The Basics

- Write the way you speak.
- Address the needs of the reader.
- Focus on one topic.
- Anticipate reader questions.
- Use short words.
- Use familiar words.
- Write short sentences.
- Avoid jargon.
- Use an active voice.
- Use personal pronouns.
- Use informative headings.
- Use lists (bullets).

Inside This Issue

How to Revise

Pages 2 and 3

Reading Grade
Level: 5.8

Before & After

How to Revise: A Sample

For this issue, we're devoting the center spread to one letter. This is just one example of how revising text can make the language and message easier for readers. The letter was intended for members who were taking the drug Zelnorm. This drug was removed from the U.S. market. Aetna needed to alert members to this news and tell them what they should do next. We've added footnotes to explain what changes were suggested and why. (Note: If you have material that you'd like to see revised, send it to us. We may feature it in a future issue of the newsletter.)

BEFORE

Dear Member:

On March 30, 2007, the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) announced that Novartis Pharmaceuticals Corporation has agreed to stop marketing Zelnorm® (tegaserod).¹ A study of patients taking Zelnorm found that there may be an increased risk of heart attack, chest pain and stroke associated with use of the drug. Novartis agreed to withdraw Zelnorm in the United States until more research can be done.²

What you should do

If you or anyone in your household is currently taking Zelnorm, please talk to your physician right away about using a different drug instead.³ Zelnorm will no longer be available at pharmacies. It also will not be covered under your Aetna prescription plan.⁴

Refunds for unused Zelnorm

You can return any unused and unexpired Zelnorm tablets to Novartis for a refund of out-of-pocket costs. To learn more, you can call Novartis, the maker of Zelnorm, at 1-888-NOW-NOVA (1-888-669-6682), or visit their website, www.zelnorm.com.

Questions about Zelnorm

Talk with your doctor. He or she can help you find other treatments that Aetna covers.⁵

The FDA has a Zelnorm information website at www.fda.gov/cder/drug/infopage/zelnorm/default.htm.⁶

Please contact us with any questions you might have about your prescription benefits at the toll-free number on your member ID card. You can log on to Aetna Navigator™, your secure member website, at www.aetna.com.

We hope this information is helpful. Your health and safety are important to us.

Sincerely,

footnote

¹ This sentence is long – 22 words – and crammed with large words. The reading grade level is 18.1.

² Readers may not understand that “Novartis agreed to withdraw Zelnorm” means the drug will no longer be sold.

³ This sentence has a reading grade level of 12.9. Why? It's long and uses many multisyllabic words – “anyone,” “currently,” “physician,” “different.”

⁴ This information is valuable. It is moved to the first paragraph in the revised letter.

⁵ This information is included in the revised letter, but in different places.

⁶ This sentence is improved in two ways: 1) The new text is active – “Learn more...” – instead of passive – “The FDA has...” 2) The new text cut the words “information” and “website.” (Readers know that a URL means “website.” And they know that “Learn more” implies “information.”)

AFTER

Dear Member:

People who take Zelnorm® may be at an increased risk of heart attack, chest pain and stroke.⁷ This news comes from a recent study. For this reason, the drug will no longer be sold in the United States. Pharmacies will no longer carry Zelnorm. And it will not be covered under your Aetna plan.⁸

What you should do

Talk to your doctor right away if you take this drug. Your doctor can help you find other treatments that Aetna covers.⁹

How to get a refund

You can return your unused Zelnorm to Novartis. You will be refunded for your out-of-pocket costs. Call 1-888-NOW-NOVA (1-888-669-6682). Or visit www.zelnorm.com.¹⁰

Where to find more information

Learn more about Zelnorm at: www.fda.gov/cder/drug/infopage/zelnorm/default.htm.

Do you have questions about your prescription benefits? Call the toll-free number on your member ID card. Or log on to Aetna Navigator™ at www.aetna.com.¹¹

We hope this information is helpful. Your health and safety are important to us.

Sincerely,

footnote

- ⁷ The revised text puts the most important message first: “This drug is dangerous.” The new text cuts out less important facts, such as the name of the drug maker and that the FDA made the announcement.
- ⁸ The revised paragraph lays out the important message in an order that’s logical from the reader’s point of view: 1) This drug you take is dangerous. 2) A new study tells us this. 3) Because it’s dangerous, this drug will no longer be sold. 4) This means pharmacies won’t carry it and Aetna will not pay for it. The new paragraph uses smaller words and shorter sentences. It has a reading grade level of 4.3; the original paragraph scored 12.4.
- ⁹ The revised text contains the same message as the original version, but the new version uses two sentences instead of one. It also uses smaller words: “doctor” instead of “physician” and “other” instead of “different.”
- ¹⁰ Note: When calculating reading grade level, skip phone numbers and web addresses. The readability tool in Microsoft Word can’t account for this text.
- ¹¹ The original text was made of two sentences. One sentence contained two commas. (Commas raise the reading grade level. This doesn’t mean you should never use commas, but if the sentence can be changed to avoid them, do so.) Also, when breaking long sentences into shorter ones, don’t be afraid to start a sentence with “or,” “and” or “but.” These are acceptable when you write the way you speak. And that’s the style we’re using in our communication with members.

Tip Sheet

Break the Secret Code: Junk the Jargon

Jargon refers to words that are special to certain jobs, sports, or hobbies. We work in an industry that uses *a lot* of jargon. And that can be bad for our writing. We want to help members understand their health and health care. But we can't do that when our members don't understand the words we use, or the context we use them in. It's like we're speaking and writing in a secret code and not sharing the key with our members.

Here are some tips to keep in mind as you write and speak:

- **Define needed jargon in short, clear terms.** Many members don't understand the word *hypertension*. But their doctors may use this word. Help members understand this term with a clear definition. A simple definition for hypertension is *high blood pressure*.

Don't write: Cysts can appear anywhere in the body, most frequently they live in the skin, ovaries, breasts or kidneys.

Do write: Cysts are sacs or capsules that form on the skin or inside the body. They can appear anywhere inside the body, most frequently the ovaries, breasts or kidneys.

- **Explain concepts or issues in simple words.** Use a dictionary or [word list](#) to replace difficult words. Ask yourself, "Can I explain this to my mother, neighbor, or Uncle Bob?"

Don't write: Most cysts are benign.

Do write: Most cysts are not cancerous.

- **Clarify jargon with examples.** A popular example is the measurement of *micrometers*, which can be compared to the thickness of human hair. That gives members a mental image of the scale you're talking about.

Don't write: A rash is often (though not always) seen in the early stage of Lyme disease.

Do write: A rash that looks like a "bull's-eye" is often (though not always) seen in the early stage of Lyme disease.

- **Avoid acronyms.** We know what an EOB is. Many members don't. Just write or say *explanation of benefits*. Don't expect members to understand our shorthand.

Don't write: CAD is the narrowing of the arteries that lie over the heart.

Do Write: Coronary artery disease is the narrowing of the arteries that lie over the heart.



 Reading Grade
Level: 5.7

Contact Us

The health literacy workgroup wants to help you meet our goal of writing all consumer copy at a 5th grade reading level. For this newsletter to be valuable to you, we need to hear from you. So [please send us your feedback](#) -- story ideas, examples, questions, and challenges and successes.

The health literacy newsletter appears four times per year.

Visit us online at http://aetnet.aetna.com/health_literacy/health_lit_main.htm