How effective are patient information leaflets?
A framework and methods for evaluation

M Garner, S Cotton, J Brittenden, J Francis

Health Psychology Group
Health Services Research Unit
University of Aberdeen
1. **Evaluation of PILs**

- Tends to be unsystematic and atheoretical, relying on
  - Impressionistic judgements
  - Readability tests

- Need for a theoretically valid framework:
  - Linguistic principles of reading
  - Patient perspective
2. Readability tests

Strengths

- Useful starting-point: wording must be accessible
- Well validated
- Easy to apply: software readily available

Limitations

- Operate on surface features
- Do not indicate:
  - Coherence of the text
  - Comprehensibility of the message
  - Readers’ responses
3. A tripartite evaluation model

1. Readability:
   - “Do I understand the words?”
   - Essential to—

2. Comprehensibility:
   - “What does it mean?”
   - Essential to—

3. Communicative effectiveness:
   - “How will I respond?”
4. Comprehensibility (1)

Two basic components:

1. Lexical items (words and phrases)
2. Syntax (grammatical structures)
Familiarity (frequency in normal usage) is important, but some less familiar words may be unavoidable.

Reader must assign contextually relevant meanings, e.g.:

- Outpatients’ department
- Laser therapy
6. Comprehensibility (3): Syntax

Syntax

- Meaning assigned by reader clause-by-clause; sentence-by-sentence
- Relationships between clauses and sentences must be immediately clear
7. Testing comprehensibility

1. PIL divided into 5-sentence chunks

1. Series of comprehension questions for key lexical and syntactic items
   ▪ Appropriate
   ▪ Partly appropriate
   ▪ Inappropriate
   ▪ Irrelevant
8. Communicative effectiveness

A function of the reader’s:

1. Cognitions (e.g., expectations)

1. Affect (e.g., worries)

1. Intentions & behaviour (e.g., to comply or not)
9. **Testing communicative effectiveness**

- Based on whole text

- Interview questions, e.g.:
  - *What is the main thing you learned?*
  - *What will you do as a result?*

- Scenarios
References

For an in-depth discussion of the model:

Garner, M., Zhenye, N., & Francis, J.

For an empirical study using the model:

Cotton, S., Garner, M, Forrest, A., Julie Brittenden, J., & Francis, J (under review)
Going beyond readability in patient information leaflets: An evaluation study using methods based on a model of communicative effectiveness, *Health Expectations*