

Improving health literacy in the community: the role of reliable multi-lingual information for people from refugee and migrant backgrounds

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Abstract

Access to information is one of the most significant barriers to participation in community and civic life. The Health Translations Directory (HTD) makes a substantial contribution to addressing this for people from culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) backgrounds.

Why does the HTD matter?

Access to information is one of the most significant barriers to participation in community and civic life. The Health Translations Directory (HTD) makes a substantial contribution to addressing this for people from culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) backgrounds.

By providing translated information, the HTD equips people from CALD backgrounds with the knowledge they require to make informed decisions about their health and wellbeing. It also supports them to better navigate the unfamiliar and complex Australian health services system.

Victoria has a long history of migration and benefits from the extraordinary success it has brought to the state. Access to information for all of the currently existing and newly arrived communities is critical. The HTD is a perfect vehicle to find the information they need, can trust, can act upon, and is delivered in a non-judgmental and non-stigmatising way.

What is health literacy?

Health literacy is about how people find, understand, and use information to make decisions about their health. It is also about how people understand and navigate the health care system. In recent years the focus of health literacy has shifted from individual responsibility for understanding complex systems and information, towards a focus on organisations improving the health environment to match the needs of their consumers.

Healthcare providers can improve the healthcare environment by:

- Improving the way information is provided (plain language, simple formatting, and being clear about what actions are required)
- Checking understanding of information in clinical interactions (using teach back methods, 'Ask Me 3' techniques)
- Considering how people navigate the health service (signs and directions)

About the Health Translations Directory

The directory is an online library that provides links to third party websites with quality translated health resources. All added resources are indexed by language, topic, keyword, title, and organisation. The HTD is easily accessible on any device with internet access via www.healthtranslations.vic.gov.au. It links to about 14,000 resources in over 100 different languages on topics such as: the Australian health system, mental health, drugs and medications, emergencies, safety, environmental health, food and nutrition, physical activity, immunisation, sexual health, family violence, aged care, allergies, parenting, palliative care, women's health, men and children's health, oral health, and many specific diseases and conditions.

The directory was developed and launched in 2004 by the Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS) and has been updated and expanded since 2014 when the Centre for Culture, Ethnicity and Health (CEH) were asked to manage the HTD.

Maintaining the collection

At CEH, we have developed editorial guidelines and a collection policy. The essential points in our editorial guidelines are:

- Always add the English version of the resource to the HTD
- Information has to be produced in Australia
- Resources need to be translated by a NAATI (National Accreditation Authority for Translators and Interpreters) translator and should preferably be focus tested with the target community

We have audited and culled the collection accordingly, removed outdated or irrelevant information, fixed broken links, plus sourced and added new materials to the collection, and created a thesaurus specifically tailored for the HTD. As part of our contract we are also required to identify gaps in translated information and to produce new resources in collaboration with the community.

Our users

We now have an average of 10,000 visitors per month. Our annual visitors total has increased by about 50% compared to the previous year and overall the visits to our site have grown by 300% since 2013. Arabic is the most popular language, followed by Vietnamese, Farsi, and Dari.

50% of all visitors are from overseas, with the United States, Canada, and Europe being the biggest users, 25% from Victoria, and the remaining users from other states in Australia.

Although the HTD was originally developed for health professionals to support and improve their communication with their patients, we now know that it is also accessed by individuals from culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) communities who are seeking translated health information for themselves and their families, plus community workers from a range of settings.

Marketing and promotion

We are sending out a bi-monthly newsletter in which we promote newly added resources and emphasise certain health events like Mental Health Week, International AIDS day, etc.

We are working closely with our content partners such as the Cancer Council Victoria, The Heart Foundation, Diabetes Victoria, and many more.

Challenges

We are a very small team and our resources are quite limited.

Broken links were a major challenge initially. We now generate a monthly broken links list and amend them immediately which allows us to keep the broken link rate under 1%.

A huge proportion of health services and health professionals are unaware of the HTD. We are pursuing various avenues to inform them, such as a roadshow (for rural areas), presentations at staff meetings, plus journal and newsletter articles.

With our limited resources, it is impossible to review the collection regularly and therefore we do receive the occasional complaint from users that the information they accessed was outdated. We follow up all issues as a matter of priority.

Future plans for the HTD

Building on the success of the HTD in the health sector, the DHHS has identified Human Services as the next area for expansion of the site. Human services topics include housing, sport and recreation, disability, child protection, and family violence. The line between Human Services and Health is not always clear cut. As we know, good housing (for instance) has a strong impact on health outcomes.

Another priority for the next couple of years is the cross-linking between the HTD and the Better Health Channel (BHC). The BHC is Australia's most trusted and comprehensive health website with nearly 15 million visits annually.

We are keen to become more responsive to information needs generated by health crises. Using our large database, we can tailor our messages to services based on their specific needs, such as sending out messages to health services when issues arise, such as the recent measles outbreak, bushfires, thunderstorm asthma, and influenza.

Conclusion

The HTD is a valuable tool that plays a critical role in meeting the information and knowledge needs of Victoria's culturally and linguistically diverse groups.

Access to information and knowledge ultimately helps communities to participate in the social and economic life of Australia, engage more effectively in service systems, and utilise resources more equitably.

We will continue to work closely with the health and human services sectors and CALD community stakeholders to ensure this tool is maintained effectively, widely promoted, and extended to include a growing range of relevant topics. As workers and organisations, you too play a crucial role in recognising and understanding barriers to information for CALD communities, utilising and contributing to the Directory, and promoting the benefits of translated information throughout your organisations and networks.