Take charge of your health today. Be informed. Be involved.

October is Health Literacy Month

PROCLAMATION—The Regional Health Literacy Coalition was presented a proclamation by Pittsburgh City Council in Oct. 2014 recognizing October as Health Literacy Month. The picture includes Councilwoman Theresa Kail-Smith; Alieu Myassi, program director for cultural competency and community health at UPMC; Councilman Corey Oconnor, Councilwoman Natalia Rudiak, Councilwoman Darlene Harris, Councilwoman Deb Gross, Harry Manley, senior community affairs specialist, Gateway Health System; Councilman Bruce Krauss, Kevin Progar, project manager, Regional Health Literacy Coalition; Tracy Lawless, legislative director, Gateway Health System and Joe Glinka, legislative affairs representative, Gateway Health System.

ESTHER BUSH

Healthy technology

This month, the "Take Charge of Your Health Today" page focuses on health technology. Jennifer R. Jones, MPH, community engagement coordinator with CTSI, and Esther L. Bush, president and CEO of the Urban League of Greater Pittsburgh, talked about this topic.

JJ: Good morning, Ms. Bush. I'm looking forward to hearing your thoughts about health technology. The health care delivery system and the way we access health information certainly is changing.

EB: It sure is, Jennifer. And many of these changes are having a positive influence on health care. More information about personal health will be readily available to us. Technology is being used in ways that it never has been before when it comes to health.

JJ: That's so true, Ms. Bush. Health technology includes many things—medical equipment used during provider visits or the new types of medication our health care providers prescribe for us. It can also include vaccines, medical procedure advances or even databases that control how our personal health information is stored and shared.

EB: It can actually seem overwhelming when you think about it. It means that, on an individual level, people have to put a lot of trust in something we can't see or always understand. I would caution people, though. Sometimes we're exposed to too much information—wrong information about a procedure or scary pictures online. Don't internalize every photo that you see. We can research our health problems too much and get filled with too many "what ifs." I've seen it happen in my own family. Appropriate support and discussion with a trusted health care provider are still very important.

JJ: That's great advice. For some people, changes and updates in health technology are welcome and easy to understand and navigate. But for others, using technology may be frustrating or even scary.

EB: Yes, unfortunately it sometimes creates extra barriers for people to access health care. I continue to be concerned about low-income individuals who may not have as much exposure or access to or understanding of the use of health technology. Access to this technology is an important conversation to have. We need to make sure that all patients—in reality, we're all patients—are aware that technology will be part of our futures. We need to evaluate how improvements in technology affect individuals who do not have technology as part of their everyday life.

JJ: I agree. There are many organizations in our local area that are thinking about such things and are working to make health care more accessible and understandable.

Thank you so much for your time and thoughts, Ms. Bush. Next month, we're talking about access to health insurance, and the "Take Charge" page will have valuable information for many of our community members. *If anyone has questions about the information on these pages, email partners@hs.pitt.edu.*

How technology impacts our health

Many of us use some sort of technology to communicate with friends and loved ones every day. Communication can be through text messages, social media platforms like Facebook or by e-mail. Stores and companies can now text us with coupons and announcements. So, what about our health? How can we use technology when it comes to something so important to all of us?

On a basic level, many of us already use technology when it comes to health care. Health care professionals are finding many ways to use technology to give out information or to make patient interactions smoother or easier. We schedule doctor's appointments online. We use on-call nurses for medical questions outside of usual business hours. We may refill a prescription online or on the phone. It's becoming common now to start a doctor's appointment with someone typing information into a computer for our electronic medical records. Health care professionals may use the Internet during an appointment to print information for patients or use images to better explain a health condition. Patients can interact with their health insurance companies online. Getting health insurance through the Affordable Care Act happens online.

Many people access health technology with their mobile phones. Studies have shown that there isn't a racial disparity when it comes to owning and using a smartphone. The Pew Research Center

reports that African Americans, Whites and Latinos have similar rates of owning cell phones but that African Americans and Latinos use phones to access the Internet more. The center also states that, as of October 2014, 64 percent of people in the U.S. own a smartphone and 85 percent of young

adults do. Of those users, 62 percent have used their phone in the past year to look up information about a health condition.

Researchers, including many at the University of Pittsburgh, are finding ways to use technology not only to interact with providers but to affect health on a personal level too. "Before about 10 years ago, people would go to their doctors if they had a problem, the doctor prescribed medicine,

you left and came back about a year later to have the doctor ask you how you are," says Brian Suffoletto, MD, assistant professor of emergency medicine at Pitt. "That leaves a lot of time for people to make health care decisions by themselves."

According to Dr. Suffoletto, the chronic conditions that

account for the majority of health care costs are driven by health behaviors—alcohol use, poor diet, physical inactivity, smoking, lack of health care, not getting enough sleep and poor stress management. Health care professionals see the technologies that many people use every day—cell phones, computers, etc.—as a way to get people's attentions and target the health behaviors that are putting them at risk.

"What we know about health behaviors is that they're strongly influenced by your environment and who you're around," says Dr. Suffoletto. "We never really had a good health care model to help people initiate, adopt and maintain health behaviors when they left the doctor's office. We now

have people saying they want help in changing their behaviors. They want to know where to find this help. And now we're seeing technology to help fill this gap."

"Online health care is a way for people to access health care without stigma at a time and place that's convenient for them," says Bruce Rollman, MD, MPH, professor of medicine and director of the Center for Behavioral Health and Smart Technology at Pitt. "These computer-

ized interactions may allow for some anonymity."

Drs. Suffoletto and Rollman both are investigating whether specific programs will change behaviors. Dr. Suffoletto and colleagues are studying a texting program that aims to reduce hazardous alcohol use. Dr. Rollman and colleagues are developing and looking at the impact of online support groups and Internet-delivered cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT) for different health conditions.

"There are very few data on the effectiveness of these mobile technologies," says Dr. Suffoletto. "Some seem favorable with regard to helping people change behaviors over time in their own environments. But more research is needed. It's important to note that of the thousands of health care apps people could download, the vast majority have not been studied to see if they're truly effective."

Both Drs. Suffoletto and Rollman remind everyone that the Internet isn't meant to take the place of talking with a trusted health care professional. Not everything people read online is necessarily accurate, and some information can be misleading or even harmful.

"We have to figure out how to integrate these technologies with humans," says Dr. Suffoletto. "People want to be able to collect heath data and want help changing behaviors. But they still want to know there's a human being who can talk to them personally about the health care information they collect."

Know where to go for online health info

There are a lot of places to find health information on the Internet. But it's important not to trust every source. For example, one study found that nine out of 10 health pages on Wikipedia don't agree with the latest medical research. That's a 90 percent chance for getting inaccurate information.

Keep calm and trust the experts. Here's a quick list of the best online health care sites:

1. **MedlinePlus.gov links to the world's largest medical library.** If you need to learn about any drug, disease or definition of a health-related word, this is the place to go. Experts from all of the U.S. health departments choose what's included and

what's not. This means no one person or company can make changes. It also means better, safer info.

2. **There's more to good health than just knowing the facts. What you do plays the biggest role. HealthFinder.gov was built to help people use health information.** Try the page's "myhealthfinder" link to find what checkups you, your child or another family member might need this year. The site won a ClearMark Award for

Plain Language in 2013. That means you don't have to worry about hard-to-understand medical language or errors in the info.

3. **AHealthyUnderstanding.org was built with the help of more than 50 local groups, including people from Allegheny County Health Department, Highmark and UPMC.** The site was built to help providers and consumers talk to each other. It offers tools for before, during and after medical visits. It also helps people prepare for emergency care. You can print tools from the site and use them to track and own your health info.

Everyone knows that technology plays a big role in health care. But the secret is—so do you! Use these sites to get tips, tools and

Smartphone stress reduction study

Stressed? Interested in learning techniques to manage your stress? Emily Lindsay and J. David Creswell at Carnegie Mellon University's Department of Psychology are recruiting for a study involving two-week, at-home training programs for stress reduction and well-being. The study tests whether delivering these audioguided programs on a smartphone can be beneficial.

The study involves two three-hour lab visits, plus 20 days of at-home study activities (about 25 minutes per day). We are recruiting a sample of generally healthy, stressed adults (ages 18-70). Participants must be available for about one month to complete study activities and must use an iPhone or Android phone.

Are you interested in learning more about this study? Contact us at cmuhealthyliving@gmail.com, or call the study hotline at 412-268-8761.