This month we are happy to feature Professor Michael S. Wolf, PhD MPH and his accomplishments in ongoing research in promoting health literacy for medication safety & adherence. ‘Health literacy’ refers to an individual’s capacity to obtain, process, and understand basic health information and services needed to make appropriate health decisions. It is one of the fastest growing topics in healthcare, having been the subject of multiple national and international reports. Those with more limited ‘health literacy’ skills possess less health knowledge, demonstrate poorer self-care, have worse physical and mental health, are hospitalized more frequently, and have a greater mortality risk. Yet many people may be challenged to understand and navigate health plans, read medical information, make sense of lab values and numbers clarifying one’s condition, remember information and instructions from the doctor, or generally problem-solve in healthcare. All of this adds up - two national economic analyses have estimated the impact of limited health literacy on our healthcare system to be as high as $230 billion annually.

But this should not be surprising. Our healthcare system is complex. What we say – and don’t say – to patients and families before, during and after seeking services can be very confusing. How does one learn to navigate a hospital or clinic? Is it easy to recognize symptoms, self-treat with the large variety of over-the-counter products, or know when to consult a physician? What services are covered by health insurance? Does the doctor speak clearly, without medical jargon?

If my prescription instructions say “take twice daily”, when exactly do I take it? What if I miss a dose? This is only a small sample of the mountain of questions people have as they engage a health system, during a time when they may be both physically and emotionally compromised. Addressing these problems is the mission of the Health Literacy & Learning Program (HeLP), founded by Dr. Wolf in 2005.

The HeLP team has led several NIH, private foundation and industry-sponsored studies targeting arguably the most prevalent and complex health behavior, that being medication use. In 2007, Dr. Wolf introduced the concept of a Universal Medication Schedule (a.k.a. ‘UMS’) to the Institute of Medicine, as a means to resolve unintentional non-adherence issues for patients increasingly taking multi-drug regimens. In addition, his team is leveraging increasingly available health and consumer technologies to support medication self-management. Over the past year, Drs. Ladner, Marina Serper (research and clinical fellow, gastroenterology/hepatology) and Wolf have put forth multiple grants towards utilizing an untethered patient portal to help new kidney transplant recipients organize and manage their complex prescription regimens and monitor their adherence. Electronic health record, web and mobile-based health technologies are being incorporated to bridge the divide between clinicians and patients to support safe and appropriate medication use.

Dr. Wolf serves as the primary lead for the Medication Adherence working group for NUTORC. The team’s mission is to apply HeLP’s existing expertise to advance the study of limited health literacy and medication adherence in liver and kidney transplantation. Contact Dr. Wolf at mswolf@northwestern.edu or 312-503-5592 for more information or if you have ideas for future opportunities to address medication self-management in the context of transplant.