

24 Oct 2022 | News

GSCF World Congress: Advancing Self-Care Literacy

by David Ridley

Self-care literacy was the subject of the first session on day two of the 2022 GSCF World Congress, with panelists pointing to patient-centricity and behavioral science as ways to promote responsible self-care.

“Self-care literacy is a fundamental part of what we do,” stated Iain Barton, founding principal of social enterprise, Health 4 Development, at the beginning of the first session on the second day of the 2022 Global Self-Care Federation World Congress in Cape Town, South Africa.

Self-care literacy and health literacy had come up again and again during the first day's sessions as areas for work on furthering the self-care agenda, Barton noted.

Giving people the tools and skills to self-diagnose and self-treat are also key to bridging the gaps between well-served and under-served individuals and communities identified on day one of the GSCF World Congress, added Sanofi Consumer Healthcare's chief science officer Josephine Fubara.

The first presentation of the day was given by Consumer Healthcare Products Australia's CEO Deon Schoombie, who introduced the concept of “self-care literacy,” as distinguished from the wider concept of health literacy.

According to public health expert Kristine Sørensen, health literacy “entails the knowledge, motivation, and competencies to access, understand appraise and apply information to form judgments and make decisions regarding healthcare, disease prevention and health promotion in everyday life to maintain and improve quality of life during the life course.”

Working with Sørensen and the Global Health Literacy Academy, GSCF in its recently published white paper came up with a definition of self-care literacy as a “sub-domain” of health literacy, as “enabling cost-effective strategies which can empower consumers to find, understand, judge,

and use information to make conscious decisions as well as manage their health more appropriately to maintain and enhance quality of life.”

Patient Experts

For Bisi Bright, however, self-care literacy is all about putting the patient at the center of healthcare.

Bright, who is a board member of the International Alliance of Patients Organisations (IAPO), described self-care as care offered to individuals outside the health system, starting with simple activities like sleep and diet.

From these beginnings, however, and with the support of healthcare professionals and consumer health companies, Bright said that individuals can advance to a higher level of self-care where they understand diseases and conditions enough to participate actively in their own health, and even help others to self-treat and manage their health conditions.

To get to the highest stage of being “patient experts,” people need to first understand that health is their own responsibility, she said. “They need to be educated about their health conditions and what their role is in looking after themselves.”

“A patient expert is someone who has taken the time to learn or has been trained about their condition, and can best understand, describe and actively participate in solutions for treating their condition,” Bright explained.

Digital Nudges

Ryan Noach gave the next presentation, which outlined how his company Discovery Health uses “nudging” to encourage members of its health insurance scheme to self-care more effectively.

Roughly three quarters of global deaths by 2030 are predicted to be a result of non-communicable diseases, revealed Noach, who serves as the South African-based firm's CEO.

Most of these diseases are the result of preventable, lifestyle-based risk factors, such as physical inactivity, poor nutrition, smoking, and alcohol abuse, he explained.

However, individual mental habits like over-confidence, an underestimation of future rewards and a bias towards the status quo – all concepts drawn from behavioral science – prevent people from making positive changes to reduce these risks, he continued.

Discovery’s digital Vitality service analyzes data drawn from its users and uses rewards and incentives to help them to make healthier choices, Noach said. For example, depending on the level of behavior change that individual members achieve, their insurance costs may go down. As

an insurer, these benefits are funded by the savings achieved in fewer pay outs for sickness due to people looking after themselves better

Mental Health

This model works particularly well for mental health, explained Noach's colleague Mosima Mabunda, who is head of Discovery's Vitality Wellness division.

Members can complete an online mental well-being assessment based on six areas – anxiety, depression, sleep, well-being, resilience and alcohol use – which results in three individual outcomes: no to low risk, moderate risk and high risk. Each level comes with support, Mabunda explained, such as a referral to a psychologist or a call from a mental health helpline.

One out of three Vitality members have used this tool, Mabunda reported, with those completing the assessment more likely to seek mental healthcare services as a result.

Interestingly, people at the higher levels of risk are three times more likely to seek help, she said, indicating that digital tools can be very effective in an area where self-care is particularly challenging.