



Information Article

It's Safe to Ask

Later this year, The Manitoba Institute for Patient Safety (MIPS) plans to launch the initiative, **It's Safe to Ask**. MIPS is pleased to provide you with advance information on this provincial health literacy initiative.

It's Safe to Ask asserts the belief that patients and families can play an important role in enhancing the safety and quality of their health care by becoming active, informed members of their care team.

It's Safe to Ask will offer information and tips for both providers and patients to improve care, make care a positive experience, and help reduce healthcare errors and critical incidents.

The degree of health literacy each patient possesses has a major impact on his or her health, and experience of healthcare. An inability to read, write, understand, and effectively use basic healthcare instructions and information puts many Manitobans at a disadvantage.

Research posted by Literacy Partners of Manitoba has shown that the number of Manitoba adults aged 20 to 64 with less than a high school diploma is over 180,000 (more than 1 in 4). The number of Manitoba adults with less than grade 9 education in many Aboriginal communities ranges between 40% and 70%. People with low literacy skills have difficulty understanding such vital information as prescriptions, infection prevention tips, and healthcare directions (<http://www.mb.literacy.ca/mstats.htm>).

Significant improvements can be made in the quality of healthcare and patient safety by doing something as simple as talking about three questions that often go unasked by patients, particularly those with low health literacy:

- What is my health problem?
- What do I need to do?
- Why do I need to do this? (adapted from Ask Me 3 in the USA)

It's Safe to Ask is a health literacy initiative aimed at

- Elderly people
- Aboriginal people
- People with low literacy, people who speak English as an additional language, and new Canadians
- Residents of Northern, rural and remote Manitoba
- Consumers of disability and mental health services
- Children and youth, and
- Physicians, pharmacists and nurses

Phase One of **It's Safe to Ask** will be launched in late 2006 with a poster and brochures for both patients and providers.

- The **It's Safe to Ask Poster** is meant to serve as a symbol that dialogue is encouraged in the health care settings where the poster is displayed.

The brochure for healthcare providers

- Defines health literacy

- Discusses how low health literacy may affect the communication process with patients, and
- Provides strategies for healthcare providers to help create an open environment when communicating with patients

The patient brochure

- Encourages patients to use **It's Safe to Ask** tools to become involved in their care by asking important health questions when they see their doctor, nurse or pharmacist
- Is translated into many languages to reflect the needs of Manitoba's diverse communities
- Offers a cartoon version with images prompting the use of the 3 good health questions

The fundamentals of **It's Safe to Ask** are consistent with the patient safety goals of Canadian Council on Health Services Accreditation, and correspond with the *Safer Healthcare Now!* campaign's strong emphasis on medication reconciliation.

It's Safe To Ask will help to change the culture of healthcare. The campaign will lead to stronger communication between patients and providers, leading patients to become more informed about their health and more active in their healthcare. Asking good health questions and understanding the answers will lead a change in behaviour, and safer outcomes for patients. When patients know that *it's safe to ask*, they will have peace of mind, because they will have a greater understanding of their diagnoses and treatment plans. When physicians encourage the use of the **Safe to Ask** questions, their visits will be focused, and their time will be effectively used.

It's Safe to Ask Steering Committee - MIPS

The Steering Committee will provide advice and guidance on the development, creation, and dissemination strategy of **It's Safe to Ask**. The Committee will review best practice, provide guidance on effectively engaging health care providers in their fields/organizations, identify leaders, liaise with partner working groups across Manitoba to spread this campaign, and participate in determining strategies to measure progress and success of **It's Safe to Ask** across the province. The Steering Committee includes representatives from Literacy Partners of Manitoba, Manitoba Health, a community health clinic, Regional Health Authorities, the general public, the Aboriginal community, medicine, nursing, and pharmacy.

MIPS will be pursuing corporate partnership which means that MIPS will seek sponsorship in an amount equal to (or greater than) a pre-determined budgeted amount. MIPS will also seek opportunities for funding contribution and/or ongoing support from, for example, Regional Health Authorities. Issues such as sustainability of the initiative and related resources and ease of availability of resources (e.g., readable from photocopy) are being considered and incorporated into planning.

About the Manitoba Institute for Patient Safety

The Manitoba Institute for Patient Safety is an independent non-profit organization created in 2004 in response to recommendations made by the Manitoba Patient Safety Steering Committee. The Institute's role is to promote, coordinate and facilitate activities that have a positive impact on patient safety throughout Manitoba while enhancing the quality of health care for Manitobans. More information on the Manitoba Institute for Patient Safety and its activities are available at <http://www.mbips.ca/>.

For more information or input, please contact

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