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Health literacy in outpatients with liver cirrhosis

Palle Bager¹, Thea Pinderup¹, Maria Freudlich¹

¹*Aarhus University Hospital, Hepatology and Gastroenterology, Aarhus N, Denmark*

Email: pallbage@rm.dk

Background and aims: Health literacy (HL) is a concept covering a range of cognitive and social skills that comprises aspects necessary for patients to navigate in the healthcare system. Our study aimed to investigate HL in patients with liver cirrhosis and determine factors associated with low HL.

Method: Face validity of 3 HL questionnaires (paper versions): the Single Item Literacy Screener (SILS) [1question (Q)], the Brief Health Literacy Screening Tool (BRIEF) [4Q], 3 dimensions of the Health Literacy Questionnaire (HLQ) [15Q] were tested in a random order in 108 outpatients with liver cirrhosis. Patients were asked to complete the 3 questionnaires themselves, but could ask a nurse for help if needed

The 3 dimensions used from the HLQ were 'Social support for health' (S-scale), 'Ability to actively engage with healthcare providers' (E-scale), and 'Understand health information well enough to know what to do' (I-scale). Unpaired t-test was used to investigate differences on the HLQ scale scores. The effect sizes (ES) were calculated between groups using the Cohen's d.

Results: 105 patients (55% male; mean age 60 years; 65% alcohol-related liver disease) completed all 3 questionnaires. 39 patients (37%) needed help to complete even the 1Q SILS questionnaire. They were characterised by: male gender, low level of education, no work, alcohol-related liver disease and severe cirrhosis. The HLQ revealed low level of HL in males (S-scale), and patients with low level of education (S-scale). The largest ES were found for employment (I-scale) (0.49), education (S-scale) (-0.43), comorbidity (I-scale) (0.42), and male (S-scale) (0.41).

Conclusion: One third of patients needed help to complete one single question about HL. Assistance is needed if asking about HL using questionnaires.

Subgroups of patients had both difficulties with the questionnaires and had low level of HL. The subgroups were mainly characterised by: male gender, low level of education, and alcohol-related liver disease.