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**Faculty of Economics
Department of Business, Economics and Management**

**Doctorate of Philosophy in
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**PhD Thesis
(Abstract)**

Health Literacy

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Abstract

The increasing interest in *health literacy* is due to the universally recognized assumption that health and knowledge are crucial assets for well being, both for individuals and the community.

Health literacy, is no longer a negligible health determinant. It goes beyond the ambit of education, pertains to community development through continuous and dynamic interaction with the social environment, and is strategically functional to the pursuit of equity, appropriateness and adequacy in health care services.

In short, *health literacy* is an empowerment strategy bent on the improvement of people' s attitude to accessing health information and using it effectively. At the same time, it is an instrument that policy makers can use to optimize health promotion, to gain better health outcomes and to cut costs in the health care system.

Our study confirms that a limit in most research is that *health literacy* is measured only in patients in the context of their relation with health professionals, whereas a "systemic vision" is sorely lacking whereby a health care organization can evaluate its capacity to deliver a service and put in place managerial and communicational mechanisms that encourage interaction between the patient/client and the health organization as a whole.

Consequently, the present study aims to investigate the attitude of health organizations when implementing policies and at the same time, to activate procedures and approaches that promote adequate levels in patient/client *health literacy* and a greater extent of *health literacy* in the community.

Assuming the hypothesis that the Italian health care system is unable to cope with policies to improve *health literacy*, and in addition, postulating that Italian health organizations are quite unaware of the issue, we attempt to show how the health system in Italy is still far from effectively activating *health literacy* pathways, since health outcomes seem to be correlated to "informal procedures" carried out by health professionals as opposed to formal engagement on the part of health organizations combined with a commitment towards literacy in patients.

Our research verifies that utility, quality and effectiveness in *health literacy* practice can only be maximized if health organizations adopt a systemic vision and pervasive policies. On the contrary, all the efforts made by health care professionals in Italy in order to put in place informal procedures are thwarted, since besides not being mainstreamed within the organization; they are sporadic and not concretized into *routines*; in terms of management, they come up against the lack of organizational commitment and clash with a non-attitude in the community on *health literacy*.

Only if health organizations acquire awareness and put in place effective processes of change, can we envisage, through the lens of *health literacy*, more equity, better outcomes, lower costs: in a word, better quality public health.

Keywords: health literacy, health outcome, organizational health literacy, health quality