

Is text alone enough for pharmaceutical labelling?

Issued by [Pyrotec](#)

3 Jul 2018

In general, the medical world has been moving ever closer to including more information on its pharmaceutical labels as it's thought this is the best way to ensure consumers have all the knowledge they need to take their medicine safely, without consuming too much, or missing vital instructions.



According to Denny Bros – the inventor of the world's first multi-page booklet label known as Fix-a- Form®; and a world-leading print company that is locally represented in South Africa by Pyrotec PackMedia – it is becoming more apparent that for some people this added text is no good. In the UK, about one in every six people is functionally illiterate, meaning they could not pass an English GCSE. These people can struggle to read the labels on medicines, especially if they contain too many technical terms, or if the text is too small.

The chairman of the UK Patients' Association, Dr Mike Smith, told the BBC: "There are many elderly patients who may find the writing in small font on the coloured labels on bottles and packets of medicines difficult to read." With all the dangers that come from taking an incorrect dose this is a serious problem.

A solution to the problem

However, an apparent solution is on the horizon. Dr Matthew Clayton – and his colleagues Faizan Syed, Anjid Rashid and Umer Fayyaz – conducted a study about improving the understanding of pharmaceutical labels for illiterate patients. This was done at the Services Hospital in Lahore, Pakistan, where 48% of patients are functionally illiterate. It's the illiteracy that was thought to be the cause of a lack of adherence to the patients' medication regimes because they were unable to follow written instructions on their drug packages.

Dr Clayton tried using images on the labels to show when the medicines needed to be taken, and how much was to be consumed at a time. Both illiterate and literate patients were given the new labels, and some were randomly selected to receive counselling for the purpose. Of the literate patients who did not receive counselling, 100% understood the new labels, while only 93% understood the old labels. Additionally, the understanding of illiterate patients who received counselling improved from 12 to 35% with counselling, and 5 to 23% without. It is thought that similar changes would have similar results in the UK. However, some people disagree. Theo Raynor, a professor of a pharmacy practice at the University of Leeds, explained his misgivings to the BBC.

Could they cause more problems than they solve?

"Pictures sound like a really easy answer but they can cause more problems than they solve," he said. He gave the example of a label that had a picture of a baby with a cross through it to illustrate this point. While the intent of this symbol was to inform people to keep the medicine out of reach of children, others took it to mean 'don't take if pregnant', 'don't give to children' or even that it was a contraceptive, showing how pictures can easily be misinterpreted.

Whether for graphics or text, there's no doubt that pharmaceutical manufacturers are under increasing pressure to have more space on their labels. A Fix-a-Form® booklet label from Pyrotec PackMedia is perfect for the job.

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