The Challenge: National studies indicate that adverse drug events are responsible for 3.6 million office visits per year, 700,000 emergency room visits and 117,000 hospitalizations. In one study, 46 percent of patients across all literacy levels misunderstood one or more medication dosage instructions. Seniors are particularly at risk of misunderstanding drug labels and misusing medications, leading to negative health outcomes such as falls. Also, national pharmacy chains have developed 31 different label styles, resulting in variability in the clarity and complexity of dosage instructions.

To address the labeling problem, in May 2013, the United States Pharmacopeia (USP) released a set of evidence-based standards for patient-centered medication labeling. The publication of these standards was a significant innovation; however, little has been done to adopt these standards in Wisconsin.

Project Goal: This project aimed to assess key pharmacy stakeholders’ current attitudes toward the USP standards, likelihood of adoption and barriers to adoption. Wisconsin Health Literacy (WHL) conducted 17 interviews within settings that serve a geographically and racially representative sample of the population. Those interviewed included pharmacists and pharmacy managers (chain and independent), primary care providers, pharmacy software vendors, members of the USP and other states’ pharmacy boards who had already enacted standards.

Results: Many key stakeholders were unaware of the new USP standards, but when informed, were quick to support their use. The main barrier in following the standards seemed to be that medication bottles had to be larger in order to fit the medication labels recommended by the USP. Therefore, local pharmacists felt that the necessary step in adopting the standards was with software developers, pharmacy owners and managers.

The interview findings were shared in a paper titled “Adopting an Easy-to-Read Medication Label in Wisconsin.” In an ongoing effort to increase awareness of the USP standards and motivate voluntary adoption, the paper is being distributed in print and is available via the web at wisconsinliteracy.org.

The next phase of this project was sustained with funding from the Healthier Wisconsin Partnership Program at the Medical College of Wisconsin. As a result, Wisconsin Health Literacy is now conducting a two-year pilot involving implementing and evaluating label improvements at three pharmacy systems with 48 pharmacy sites and convening a Medication Label Summit in 2017. Wisconsin Health Literacy hopes to broaden adoption standards across the state.