AETC-NMC
AIDS Education and Training Center
National Multicultural Center
HOWARD UNIVERSITY COLLEGE OF MEDICINE

Case Study Adapted from Addressing HIV Care and Health Literacy

John is a 65-year-old white man who has sex with men and who presents with anal lesions and rectal bleeding. A blood test reveals that John is positive for HIV antibodies and has a CD4+ T cell count that is below 200 cells/mm^3. An anal Pap smear is performed and shows squamous intraepithelial lesions. John's physician assistant, Ms. Gonzalez, plans to refer him for an anoscopy and biopsy. While filling out the necessary paperwork for this procedure, the desk clerk notices that John is having problems completing the forms and leaves several sections blank. The clerk reports this back to Ms. Gonzalez.

Ms. Gonzalez plans to speak with John about his HIV status and the possible diagnosis of cancer as well. As she starts to counsel John, she hands him a brochure that gives more details about the virus. John is hesitant about taking the brochure, but places it in his pocket and says that he will read it later. John says he prefers to talk directly to Ms. Gonzalez rather than read a brochure.

Discussion Questions

1. How can Ms. Gonzalez assess John's health literacy level? Does the fact that he put the brochure away gives any clues?
2. John is a man who has sex with men and he has been an adult during the span of the HIV epidemic. Can we make any assumptions about his health literacy based on that? How can Ms. Gonzalez verify or refute those assumptions?
3. Based on lab values, John's HIV is well established. Does that tell us anything about what John knows and/or has accepted about HIV?
4. If John has low health literacy, what would be the added challenge to his HIV care and treatment? How can a provider explain what a positive HIV antibody test means? How can a provider explain the treatment/prevention/risk reduction regimen for HIV infection? How can a provider explain the screening test and the referral for a biopsy?
5. Should members of the office staff be involved in this process? If so, how?
6. What other issues should be considered based on the John's age? Be sure to consider access to resources, services, and support systems.
7. Based on the case study discussion, what strategies to address health literacy might you include in an action plan for John's care?
8. Discuss other Cultural Competence issues that may impact retention into care and treatment