Patient and Public Involvement (PPI): tips for researchers

Suggestions for writing in plain English

A few tips to help you write information papers that the general public can understand. Points collated by the National Trauma Musculoskeletal PPI group. Be aware that literacy can be a problem, short texts in normal, everyday language may be easier to understand than more complex texts, especially those on unfamiliar topics; see https://literacytrust.org.uk/parents-and-families/adult-literacy/ (accessed 23Dec2019).

We suggest you consider the following:

- Normally, use a plain font (a 'sans serif' font, such as Arial);

- Be ready to provide text in other formats or languages on request;

- Use a larger sized (14/16) font, this is especially important for texts aimed at older people and those with any kind of reading / sight difficulties;

- Be ready to provide text in other formats on request, including large print format for sight-impaired people, and picture format for those who may have learning difficulties / brain damage; include a note in the text which mentions these options, and how to access them;

- Use short sentences;

- Break the text into short paragraphs; headings are good signposts that help the reader to find their way around longer texts;

- Ensure the message is short and to the point. If it must be long, give an executive summary at the top;

- Use simple everyday words, such as 'before' instead of 'prior', generally, use shorter, vernacular vocabulary, rather than longer, Latin-derived words;

- Use as few acronyms as possible;

- If you have to use any acronyms, when you first use them, explain simply what they mean, using brackets: e.g., NASA (National Aeronautics and Space Administration); and also include a reminder list at the end of the paper;

- Use the active voice, rather than the passive: e.g., 'The decision was taken to do xyz' -> 'We decided to do xyz';

- Use underlining / bold type / capital letters (upper case) / red print for any parts of the text which are particularly important, including, e.g., headings;

- Check how you describe interventions, do not imply they belong to the patient eg., the patient's procedure;

- Be clear, but do not patronise;

- Be honest and open (say it as it is);

- Have a document scrutinised by a PPI group member before it is published;

- Remember to sign (e.g. with your initials), date and version number every paper;

- Always include a telephone number and / or email address for any queries (if you'd prefer to get emails rather than phone calls, put the email address first);

- Please remember to include a 'thank you' for any contributions;

- Remember to include any essential logos of funders / stakeholders, e.g., University of Oxford, NDORMS.

- Use the word 'people' instead of 'patient' wherever possible

Useful links

http://www.plainenglish.co.uk/files/howto.pdf