

## CASE STUDY:

### Patient Information Leaflets: Benefits and Potential Pitfalls



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A patient information leaflet (PIL) is a document given to the patient, which contains important information regarding the medication, in a language easily understood by the patient. A PIL can be given by the doctor during consultation or the pharmacist during dispensing and patient counselling session.

PILs are frequently used to complement verbal counselling provided by the doctors and pharmacists regarding medication use. By providing the patient with a physical copy of the medicine information, it helps to reinforce their understanding of the verbal information given by the servicing healthcare professional and serves as a reminder for them in case they forget in the future.

The benefits of PILs have been demonstrated in several studies. PILs have been found to help patients gain a better understanding of their medications and conditions and facilitate proper medication use, leading to improved patient compliance and a higher degree of patient satisfaction. The provision of information may also reduce patient anxiety by empowering patients to practice greater self-management. For healthcare professionals, the use of PILs has also been found to decrease consultation times, improving the efficiency of the healthcare service.

In those studies, most patients preferred to receive a PIL, especially when they are prescribed a medication for the first time. The patients claimed to have read the PILs given to them, at least occasionally. The patients often look out for the reason

to use the medication, how the medication works and its benefits, how to take the medicine, as well as its possible side effects.

A poorly designed PIL, however, might be ineffective and does not serve its desired purposes. For instance, a PIL with too much information may be a turn-off for patients as it might be too overwhelming for them to process. This could negatively influence their decision to read the leaflet. When too much information is provided for the side effect profile of the medication, patients may also feel daunted or anxious and not want to take the medication due to the fear of experiencing any side effect, ultimately translating to decreased patient compliance. Besides that, PILs with an excessive use of technical or medical jargons might not be well understood by the patients, which could lead to confusion and defeat the original purpose of providing information to the patients. Hence, the design of a PIL is critical to its success and needs to be carefully considered.

What are the features of a well-designed PIL?

- A good PIL should be designed in a user-friendly format that allows easy reading and comprehension. A question-and-answer format is often useful to increase patient engagement.
- Pictures or diagrams are also a helpful aid to convey information effectively, especially in educating patients on the administration techniques for non-oral medications. It allows patients to better visualise the correct administration techniques for non-oral medications, e.g. inhaler, subcutaneous injection, etc.
- The language used should be in a 'layman' style, with medical jargons replaced by more easily understood words that convey the same meaning. Multilingual PILs are also good to cater for people who speak different languages.
- The content of the PIL should be concise and unambiguous to avoid unwanted confusion. It is important to include only the important and relevant information to prevent the PIL from becoming too lengthy.
- Special attention should be paid when designing the side effect profile. As mentioned, an excess of information may frighten the patient and adversely impact compliance. Only the more clinically relevant and applicable side effects should be listed, and these should be categorised, according to the frequency of occurrences. In addition, advice on how to manage the side effects as well as when to seek medical attention should also be included. With such information, patients will be able to better anticipate the types of side effects they would experience, and what side effects warrant medical evaluation, without experiencing unnecessary anxiety.