Time to rethink use of English-only medicine labels

Having information on medicine in a language the patient is comfortable with is necessary, especially with Singapore's ageing population

Rahul Malhotra, Tan Yi Wen and Sumithra Suppiah

For The Straits Times

If you can read this sentence, you may question the need to rethink the labels on medicine. But 33 per cent of Singaporeans aged 65 and above, who are not literate in English, will likely disagree with you.

Medicine labels — the stickers printed and affixed by hospitals, pharmacies, GPs, clinics and community pharmacies in Singapore on prescription medicine packets and bottles before they are dispensed — contain written information on the medicine, alongside patient and healthcare institution or pharmacy details.

The Health Products Act mandates the provision of such labels while dispensing prescription medicines, and that they should be in English. Although there is no restriction on adding another language, most medicine labels are provided only in English.

A 2018 study conducted by Duke-NUS Medical School’s Centre for Ageing Research and Education (Care) which examined 1,169 prescription medicine labels found that 61 per cent were used only in English. In 2020, a smaller study conducted on 131 labels found that 76 per cent were only in English. While patients of any age who are not literate in English are likely to be challenged by such medicine labels, the issue is rather acute for older patients, as they are the largest users of prescription medicines for chronic diseases.

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Enable our growing senior population to understand their medicines better

Nationally representative surveys conducted by Care show that the proportion of older Singaporeans reporting more than three chronic diseases has almost doubled between 2009 and 2017. Consequently, an increasing number of older adults are using long-term medicines daily. The surveys also reveal that one in 10 older Singaporeans has polypharmacy — that is, taking five or more prescription medicines daily. Not understanding the multiple labels full of complex medical jargon makes taking medications difficult.

Medication labels also contain prescribing information, which may be too complex to read and understand. Medical errors occur when patients fail to explain their condition to the pharmacy staff to help explain the prescription. In Singapore, in 2018, there were 11,982 hospital admissions due to medication errors, including 8,028 cases where patients were prescribed incorrect dosage of medication.

Hearing loss makes it difficult for older people to understand medication labels. In Singapore, an estimated 21 per cent of people aged 60 to 69 and 43 per cent of people aged 70 to 79 have hearing loss.

Enabling older patients to understand their medicines better is therefore key.

Rahul Malhotra

Family caregivers or domestic helpers play a key role in managing medicines for older adults.

Medication labels are relevant to older adults as they are the largest users of prescription medicines for chronic diseases.

Rahul Malhotra, head of research at Care, and an assistant professor at Duke-NUS, an academic medical centre, says that with the number of older adults increasing, it is important to better understand and manage their medication needs.

Medications in Singapore are prescribed in English, which may not be understandable to older adults who are not literate in English.

Older adults are often asked not to fill the written medical instructions on labels or not to trust the information on labels as it cannot be understood.
