

Health Literacy as a cornerstone in the fight against tuberculosis: the role of the Portuguese Society for Health Literacy

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Abstract

Tuberculosis remains one of the greatest global challenges to public health. This condition perpetuates inequalities and disproportionately affects the most vulnerable populations. The eradication of TB requires more than a biomedical strategy; it requires an integrated approach, in which health literacy plays a fundamental role. The Portuguese Society for Health Literacy (SPLS) is highlighted in this context, supporting and empowering the community to make better health decisions, with evidence-based knowledge at its core. This article examines the importance of the SPLS in the fight against TB and analyses how its initiatives align with the National Health Plan (PNS) and the guidelines of the World Health Organisation (WHO). This alignment demonstrates the importance of literacy as a means of prevention, diagnosis and adherence to treatment.

Keywords: Tuberculosis, Health Literacy, Portuguese Society for Health Literacy, National Health Plan, World Health Organisation.

1. Introduction

Tuberculosis (TB) is an infectious disease caused by *Mycobacterium tuberculosis* (M. tb), also known as Koch's bacillus, transmitted via the air and associated with social determinants of health, such as poverty, malnutrition and lack of access to adequate healthcare. Despite progress in treatment and diagnosis, TB remains the leading cause of death from infectious diseases every year (WHO, 2024). Its complexity extends beyond the biomedical sphere and requires multidisciplinary efforts for its detection and elimination.

In Portugal, the incidence of TB has gradually declined, reflecting public health policies and improved socio-economic conditions. However, challenges persist, particularly among the most vulnerable population groups, such as homeless people, prisoners and immunocompromised individuals (PNS, 2022). Antimicrobial resistance and difficulties in adhering to treatment represent additional obstacles that reinforce the need for effective educational strategies.

In this context, the SPLS emerges as a strategic driver, promoting health literacy and empowering citizens and professionals to better address the challenges posed by TB. This article analyses how SPLS initiatives align with the guidelines of the National Tuberculosis Programme 2030 (PNS 2030) (PNS, 2022) and the WHO (2024), reinforcing the role of literacy as an essential pillar in the eradication of TB.

2. Tuberculosis: between science and social reality

TB is a disease that goes beyond its clinical dimension, being deeply rooted in social and economic contexts. Although curable, its eradication remains a challenge due to factors such as late diagnosis, treatment non-adherence and drug resistance. The WHO's *Global Tuberculosis Report 2024* (2024) emphasises that TB remains one of the deadliest infectious diseases, requiring strengthened prevention strategies and a patient-centred approach (WHO, 2024).

In Portugal, TB control efforts are aligned with the PNS 2030 (PNS, 2022), which highlights the need to strengthen epidemiological surveillance, combat the stigma associated with the disease and promote community involvement (PNS, 2022). The integration of health literacy into these strategies has proven essential for reducing barriers to diagnosis and treatment, empowering citizens to make informed decisions about their health.

3. SPLS and the commitment to health literacy: an integrated strategy

SPLS's mission is to transform people's relationship with health information, making it accessible, understandable and actionable. In the context of TB, SPLS plays a unique role: on the one hand, by combating misinformation; and on the other, by focusing on empowering individuals and healthcare professionals to tackle the disease more effectively. The impact of its actions is directly aligned with the priorities of the PNS 2023 (PNS, 2022) and the WHO (2024), highlighting the need for a holistic and participatory response.

The SPLS promotes educational initiatives that demystify TB, dispelling myths and reducing the stigma associated with the disease. This is in line with the guidelines of the PNS 2030 (PNS, 2022), which emphasise the importance of empowering the population in the promotion of public health. The WHO (2024) emphasises that knowledge is a determining factor in adherence to treatment and the prevention of new infections, making the dissemination of clear and accessible information essential.

The training of healthcare professionals is one of the fundamental pillars of the SPLS. Through workshops, courses and educational materials, the society contributes to the continuous updating of knowledge in the field of health and to a more humanised approach in the care of patients with TB. This is in line with the recommendations of the WHO (2024), which emphasise the need for trained professionals to ensure early diagnosis and effective interventions (WHO, 2022).

The WHO (2024) highlights that adherence to TB treatment is one of the greatest challenges in combating the disease. SPLS works to build support networks, providing information materials and promoting motivational strategies for patients, thereby preventing treatment dropouts and resistant forms of the disease. This approach is in line with the goals of the PNS 2030 (PNS, 2022), which recognise the need for care centred on the patient and their social reality.

No organisation combats TB in isolation. The SPLS strengthens strategic partnerships with government institutions, NGOs, research centres, and many other societal structures to maximise the impact of its actions. This cross-sectoral collaboration, recommended by both the PNS 2030 (PNS, 2022) and the WHO (2024), ensures a coordinated and sustainable response to TB.

4. Conclusion

TB remains a persistent challenge, requiring solutions that go beyond the biomedical sphere and integrate social, educational and political approaches. SPLS plays a central role in this effort, promoting health literacy as an essential tool for prevention, early diagnosis and adherence to treatment.

By aligning with the PNS 2030 (PNS, 2022) and WHO guidelines (2024), SPLS actively contributes to the creation of a more informed and resilient society, where TB can be effectively controlled and,

eventually, eradicated. Investing in health literacy is investing in lives, strengthening the collective capacity to act against one of humanity's most persistent diseases.

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