

Working with Medical Interpreters

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Why use a Medical Interpreter?

Having a trained medical interpreter enables the provider to offer high quality care to patients with limited English proficiency (LEP). Research also indicates that face-to-face medical interpretation is more effective than phone interpretation. Further, having a trained medical interpreter keeps the provider in compliance with Title VI of the Civil Rights Act. www.hhs.gov/ocr

Unfortunately for many LEP speakers and their providers, the medical experience is often a difficult one. With a medical interpreter, the client and provider are more likely to achieve:

- Accurate and timely diagnoses
- More cost-effective diagnosis and treatment
- Improved compliance with medication and treatment plans
- Better health outcomes

Guidelines for Working with Interpreters

These simple guidelines can help you communicate more easily and effectively with clients who have limited English proficiency (LEP).

1. Use trained, bilingual, bicultural interpreters.

2. Identify the appropriate language.

There may be several languages or dialects spoken in your client's country of origin. It is always best to double-check through the interpreter that the client feels comfortable with a given interpreter or language. There may be valid political or psychological reasons that a client refuses or requests a certain interpreter or language.

3. Allow extra time for the session.

When using an interpreter, everything must be repeated twice. Also be aware that some concepts or systems that we are accustomed to in the United States do not exist in other countries. Ex. HMOs, certain laws and regulations (HIPAA), etc. It may also take more time to convey these concepts in another language.

4. Introduce yourself to the client and the interpreter.

Begin the session by clearly stating your name, your organization, and the purpose of the call or session, as well as how you hope to help the client. Be sure the interpreter knows who all the people in the session are.

5. Start the Session with Making a Commitment to Confidentiality.

Your LEP client needs to know that the information transmitted between the parties will remain confidential. Trained and competent interpreters practice confidentiality through the Interpreter Code of Ethics as well.

6. Speak slowly and clearly using short sentences.

Consecutive interpreting (sentence-by-sentence or section-by-section) is the most effective mode of interpreting over the phone or in a medical setting. Speak slowly and pause frequently to allow the interpreter to work. Asking an interpreter to remember long sentences or passages can lead to omissions.

7. Address the LEP client directly.

Remember to speak in first person, facing your client and addressing him or her directly.

8. Use simple language.

As with any other patient, avoid using slang, jargon and metaphors. Communicate with the LEP person at the language level he or she can understand, being sure to explain complicated concepts or terminology. You, as the medical professional or social worker, are in the best position to explain these concepts. The interpreter's role is simply to transmit the message.

9. Allow Time for Questions.

Always allow your patients to seek clarification if they do not understand something. The best way to ensure that they have understood your explanations and instructions is to ask them to repeat back to you what was said. The interpreter will be happy to facilitate this check.

10. Practice Patience.

Everyone wants to be treated with dignity and respect. Your patience and warmth will help your patient communicate more openly, thoroughly and honestly about his or her health and well-being.

Things to Avoid:

1. Avoid using family members, especially children, as interpreters.

Family members cannot assure accuracy, confidentiality, or objectivity in the process. Using children as interpreters is especially ill-advised. Children do not have the knowledge or emotional maturity to serve in this role. Furthermore, interpreting for family members often adversely affects the child's well-being and dynamics within the family structure.

2. Avoid speaking in a loud voice.

Speaking louder does not help the LEP patient understand better and may actually intimidate the patient.

3. Be sure to consider the gender, ethnicity or dialect of the LEP person when selecting an interpreter. Certain interpreters may be inappropriate for a particular patient's situation.

Additional References: The Cross Cultural Healthcare Program, www.xculture.org