

Working With Medical Interpreters

The United States is a diverse country, and healthcare providers will likely encounter patients from various backgrounds in the course of everyday care. Some of these patients might have limited English proficiency (LEP) or other communication barriers that will affect how they give and receive information. Cultural factors also might influence how these patients discern health information.

Suboptimal communication during healthcare encounters can result in many negative outcomes, including delayed diagnoses, misunderstanding of care plans, medication errors, lack of follow-through, misuse of health services, and lack of trust and confidence in healthcare providers.¹

Working with medical interpreters can help address issues related to miscommunication and ensure that patients from all backgrounds receive the same level of high-quality care. Further, incorporating medical interpreters into the care team can help ensure that healthcare organizations are in compliance with state and federal laws.*

Although working with medical interpreters can be very beneficial for providers and patients, it also can present some challenges and may affect the dynamic of the provider–patient relationship. The following tips can help healthcare providers ensure best practices for working with interpreters in the clinical setting.²

1

Work with your office staff to identify patients who will require interpreters prior to their appointments. Build in extra time for these appointments with the knowledge that everything communicated will need to be spoken twice.

* Physicians, hospitals, healthcare facilities, and other healthcare providers who receive federal financial assistance or funding are generally responsible for providing interpreters, auxiliary aids, or other service accommodations at no cost to patients as specified in Section 1557 of the Affordable Care Act.

2

Whenever possible, use certified medical interpreters to communicate with patients who have LEP or communication disabilities. Do not have healthcare providers or staff who are not trained or certified serve as medical interpreters.

3

For privacy and sensitivity reasons, avoid using a patient's family or friends, including minor children, as interpreters. When patients prefer to use their own interpreters, ask them to acknowledge in writing (in their preferred language) that they are declining to use the practice's interpreter.

4

Make sure that interpreters adhere to the International Medical Interpreter Association's [practice standards](#) in the areas of interpretation, cultural interface, and ethical behavior.

5

Do not use translated written materials as a substitution for oral communication with patients. Although translated, plain-language materials should be available, they should not take the place of verbal dialogue using a qualified medical interpreter.

6

Work to understand the dynamics of, and best practices for, triadic medical relationships (i.e., encounters involving the provider, the interpreter, and the patient). Establishing good rapport will help facilitate open communication and patient engagement.

7

Schedule a pre-session for medical appointments involving interpreters. During the pre-session, provide the interpreter with a brief overview of the patient and the purpose for the visit, establish goals for the medical encounter, and set standards or rules (e.g., asking for a sentence-by-sentence interpretation and advising the interpreter not to answer for the patient).

8

Make sure to maintain control of the medical encounter. The interpreter should facilitate the flow of information, but not lead the discussion. The interpreter should be as unobtrusive as possible. If the interpreter is present in the room, ask them to sit next to or behind the patient.

9

During the medical encounter, face the patient and speak directly to them (not the interpreter). Ask the patient to interact directly with you as well. Speak clearly, use lay language when possible, explain medical concepts, and avoid medical jargon, slang, metaphors, and acronyms.

10

Speak in short sentences and only ask one question at a time. This will allow the interpreter to clearly transmit the information to the patient without overwhelming them, and it will give the patient time to ask questions.

11

Request that the interpreter use open-ended questions to clarify any information from the patient. Try to avoid interrupting the interpreter, and maintain situational awareness to gauge what is happening.

12

Assess the patient's comprehension of important health information using a technique such as [teach-back](#). Ensure the interpreter is providing a sentence-by-sentence interpretation of what the patient says so you can evaluate their understanding of important information. Ask the interpreter to tell you if they have any doubts about the patient's understanding.

13

Determine whether scheduling a debrief conversation with the interpreter after the medical encounter will be helpful to assess what procedures or aspects of the medical encounter can be improved.

14

Document the use of the interpreter and the interpreter's name in the patient's health record.

Resources

For more information about providing high-quality care to a diverse patient population, see MedPro's [Risk Resources: Health Literacy and Cultural Competence](#).

Endnotes

¹ Agency for Healthcare Research and Quality. (2012, September). *Improving patient safety systems for patients with limited English proficiency: A guide for hospitals*. Retrieved from www.ahrq.gov/health-literacy/professional-training/lepguide/index.html

² U.S. Department of Health and Human Services Office of Minority Health. (2018, December 31 [last reviewed]). *A physician's practical guide to culturally competent care*. Retrieved from <https://cccm.thinkculturalhealth.hhs.gov/default.asp>; International Medical Interpreters Association. (2007). *Medical interpreting standards of practice*. Retrieved from www.imiaweb.org/standards/standards.asp; Sindhu, K. (2020, May 13). *Working with medical interpreters*. Wolters Kluwer. Retrieved from www.wolterskluwer.com/en/expert-insights/working-with-medical-interpreters

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