

Working effectively with an interpreter

Health care providers often have to rely on an interpreter to communicate with their patients/clients who do not speak English.

Patients/clients may bring along their friends, relatives or volunteers to interpret for them. Sometimes health care providers will provide the interpreter.

Some of these interpreters can be very experienced and professional; others may have no training at all. The experience of

using an interpreter can be positive when the interpreter is able to facilitate communication in both directions, helping health care providers to understand their patients'/clients' needs, questions and concerns.

However, using an interpreter can be a frustrating and time consuming process. This is especially true when the interpreters are unclear about their roles and expectations.

Following are some tips that you can use in preparing yourself and the interpreter for an effective communication process.

Before the interview

- ✓ Find out whether the patient/client needs an interpreter
- ✓ Find out the language of the patient/client; be sure that the interpreter is speaking the same language as the patient/client
- ✓ Prior to the interview, brief the interpreter:
 - ◆ Discuss the purpose of the interview and the interpreter's role
 - ◆ Discuss how you will work together:
 - whether to summarize or to translate word for word
 - to translate as accurately as possible
 - to ask for clarification if something is not clear, rather than guessing at what has been said;
 - to give cues if you are speaking too fast
 - ◆ Ask her/him, if appropriate, to alert you to some of the cultural factors that may affect the interview (e.g. how to address the patient, how to pronounce the patient's name correctly, body language, cultural practices, etc.). But remember that interpreters do not consider themselves to be cultural experts.
- ✓ Emphasize the importance of confidentiality.

Time spent with the interpreter before the interview will help you to build a good working relationship, so you and the interpreter are clear about the aims of the interview and her/his role.

Starting the interview

- ✓ Introduce yourself and the interpreter
- ✓ Arrange the seating in a way that allows direct communication between you and the patient/client
- ✓ Explain both your role and the interpreter's role
- ✓ Explain the purpose of the interview and how it will proceed
- ✓ Speak directly to the patient/client as you would with an English speaker.

During the interview

- ✓ Speak slowly and clearly. Speaking louder does not help.
- ✓ Use plain English where possible; avoid medical jargon
- ✓ Pause after two or three sentences to allow the interpreter to relay the message.
- ✓ Stop speaking when the interpreter signals (such as raising her/his hand) or starts to speak
- ✓ If you have a long discussion with the interpreter, be sure that the interpreter explains the nature of the conversation to the patient/client.

Important: Allow time for the interpreter to translate.
If the patient/client does not understand, it is your responsibility (not the interpreter's) to explain more simply.

Ending the interview

- ✓ Check that the patient/client has understood the key messages in your interview
- ✓ Ask if she/he has any more questions
- ✓ Thank both the patient/client and the interpreter.

After the interview

- ✓ Debrief the interpreter where possible, to obtain feedback regarding any interpreting difficulties and ways for improvement for future interviews. (This should happen later as it may make the patient/client uncomfortable if you are seen to be in detailed conversation with the interpreter)
- ✓ Thank the interpreter again.