

Tips for Working with Health Care Interpreters

By Cynthia E. Roat, MPH

Working With Any Interpreter:

1. Greet the patient first, *then* greet the interpreter.
2. Focus on and speak to the patient, not the interpreter.
3. Speak at an even pace and pause often to allow the interpreter to interpret.
4. Pay attention to the patient's body language.
5. Ask one question at a time.
6. Use plain English; avoid slang, jargon, technical/medical terms, and acronyms.
7. Pay attention to cultural issues.
8. Assume that everything you say and everything that the patient says will be interpreted.
9. If you need to talk directly to the interpreter about an issue of communication or culture, tell the patient first what you are going to be addressing with the interpreter.
10. Do not hold the interpreter responsible for what the patient does or doesn't say; the interpreter is the medium of the message, not the source.
11. Understand that the interpreter may need to "paint word pictures" of some of the terms you may use; this may take longer than your original speech. Many concepts you express have no linguistic, or often even conceptual, equivalent in other languages.
12. If your patient is focusing excessively on the interpreter, you can use the following techniques to get the patient to focus on you:
 - Use the patient's name. People respond to their name regardless of the language in which it is said.
 - Move your chair closer to the patient.
 - Make sure you are making eye contact with the patient as often as possible.
 - Use facial expressions and body language that communicate interest and attentiveness.
 - If you feel it is appropriate, a light touch on the patient's knee will bring his/her attention back to you.
13. Make no assumptions about the patient's educational level. A patient's inability to speak English does not necessarily equate with a lack of education.

14. A professional interpreter's area of expertise is cross-lingual communication. Respect his or her role.

Working With Untrained Interpreters:

1. Perform a *pre-session* with the interpreter before starting the medical interview. Introduce yourself to the interpreter, establish the interpreter's level of English and professional training, and remind the interpreter that you expect everything to be interpreted accurately. Encourage the interpreter to ask if there is anything he or she doesn't understand.
2. Position the foreign language interpreter next to the patient and a bit behind him or her. However, position the *sign-language interpreter* next to you, facing the patient.
3. If you suspect the interpreter is editing or adding, remind him or her to be accurate and ask for a rendition of everything that was just said.
4. Intervene to stop side conversations.
5. If necessary, remind the interpreter of his or her role: to facilitate communication only.

When working with telephonic interpreters:

1. Use appropriate telephonic equipment -- a speakerphone, a dual headset phone, or a dual handset phone.
2. Remember that the interpreter is "blind" to what is happening in the room; "narrate" for him or her exactly what is happening throughout the session.

When working with interpreters in mental health:

1. Conduct a more detailed pre-session than usual, especially if the patient is psychotic.
2. Consider the patient's particular diagnosis when positioning the interpreter.
3. Be aware that a skilled interpreter will stop interpreting "meaning" and start interpreting "word patterns" if the patient starts to be incoherent.
4. If appropriate, avail yourself of the interpreter's knowledge of culture to help understand patient behavior. Avoid questions that infer a diagnosis, such as "Is this patient paranoid?" or "Does this patient seem delusional?"
5. In group meetings where an interpreter is present, make sure people speak one at a time. Allow extra time for interpreting to occur.
6. Be aware that retraumatization and secondary trauma are real issues for interpreters in mental health. Make sure your interpreter gets help if he or she needs it.