

Working Effectively with an Interpreter

Use Approved Qualified Interpreters

A professional, qualified medical interpreter is the most basic requirement for a successful interpreted encounter. A qualified interpreter knows his/her role, limitations, and responsibilities.

Do Not Depend on Children, Relatives or Friends to Interpret

Children must not be used as interpreters: they should not have to assume the task of interpreting. Relatives & friends are not neutral: they have their own opinion about the care that the patient is receiving and therefore make very poor interpreters. It takes more than being bilingual to be a good interpreter.

Have a Brief Pre-Interview Meeting with the Interpreter

Whenever possible, conduct a pre-session by introducing yourself to the interpreter and giving the interpreter key background information.

Speak Directly to the Patient, Not the Interpreter

Speak at an Even Pace in Relatively Short Segments

Speak in your normal voice (not louder or slower!). Speak for a short time (one longer sentence or 3 or 4 short ones) and then stop at a natural place to let the interpreter interpret. Avoid complicated sentence structures and changing your thought in the middle of the sentence.

Do Not Hold the Interpreter Responsible for What the Patient Does or Does Not Say

The interpreter is the medium, not the source of the message.

Avoid Jargon or Technical Terms

Avoid idioms, technical words and cultural references that the patient may not understand. Be aware that many concepts you express have no linguistic equivalent in other languages. The interpreter may have to use explanatory phrases; this may take longer than the original speech.

Meeting the Challenges of Caring for the Underserved

During the Encounter, Do Not Say Anything that You Do Not Want the Patient to Hear

Expect that everything you say will be interpreted.

Keep in Mind that a Lack of English is Not a Reflection of Low Cognitive Function

Be Patient

Providing care across a language barrier takes time. However, by communicating clearly you will develop a good rapport and will avoid dangerous misunderstandings.

Sources: Bruce Downing, PhD; Robert Putsch, MD; Ellen Rau