

THE ROLE OF THE MEDICAL INTERPRETER

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Effective communication is essential in receiving proper healthcare for individuals with limited English proficiency. The problem for many new immigrants and LEP's in Minnesota is they may receive the physical care that they need but they don't necessarily understand what is going on during a medical appointment or what they need to do post visit. Although there may be health care professionals that understand another language it is hard to find someone who speaks the less common languages.

Some health care professionals know enough to get through a basic conversation with the patient but without a good understanding and appreciation of the patient's culture communication can just add further confusion. To have an effective conversation with the patient the healthcare professional should understand their culture and how it affects their language and also how to directly translate meaning not just words.

Health care professionals can get assistance with issue like these through medical interpreters. Medical interpreters should be specially trained in their target language and culture and also in medical terminology and procedure. They should also pass either certification or skills assessment tests before they can begin working.

The level of education and certification required to work varies from state to state. Most states do not require certification so it is up to the individual agencies to provide their own level of certification to ensure competency. Agency training for medical interpreters should include comprehensive medical terminology testing and preparation for the different situations that might be encountered at the clinic or hospital. Also, it is essential that interpreters are familiar with the regulations and ethics involved in the medical field and understand HIPAA standards and patient confidentiality practices.

There is more to medical interpreting than just simply repeating what the physician has said in another language. Medical interpreters must keep their patients feelings in mind as much as their physical problems. Although interpreters are supposed to be just "the voice" of the health care professional, medical interpreters must ask questions for the patient and make sure that they understand everything thing that is being discussed. It is equally important that interpreters communicate everything the healthcare professional is saying accurately and impartially without adding in their own feelings or thoughts. Interpreters should also assist with the paperwork that has to be filled out prior to the procedure and accompany the patient to the pharmacy if requested.

Interpreting is not an exact science and therefore there is some confusion regarding the proper role of the interpreter. Is the interpreter supposed to only interpret and be just "the voice" of the doctor, or does the interpreter have an obligation to do more than that and advocate on behalf of the patient? Unfortunately, there is no definitive answer and the Interpreter code of Ethics offers little guidance. However, it is precisely this gray area which causes confusion, mistrust, and frustration among medical professionals and interpreters. One idea to facilitate the communication process among the parties would be for health care professionals to lay down

minimum boundaries to the interpreter before the appointment of what their expectations are and what they want to be communicated and accomplished during the visit. It is also essential that health care professionals effectively communicate with the interpreter agencies and keep them informed about interpreter, patient, and staff interaction to ensure a positive experience for all.