

Use of interpreters

As medical practitioners, we have a duty of care to make sure our patients understand the information we give them. Qualified interpreting services can help you manage communication problems with patients who are not confident or capable of speaking and understanding English.

The Medical Board of Australia's *Good medical practice, a code of conduct for doctors in Australia* identifies effective communication with patients as a basic standard of good clinical care. In meeting this need, doctors should be prepared and able to get help from a qualified interpreter when necessary¹.

Relatives or friends as interpreters

It's common for relatives or friends to act as interpreters in medical consultations with patients of non-English speaking backgrounds. While this may be convenient, there are many disadvantages for our patients. For example, there can be poor interpretation of medical terms and thus a higher likelihood of error, and even censoring (deliberately or otherwise) of vital information. A further risk is patient embarrassment about sensitive information.

The RACGP's Standards for general practices recommends restricting use of family or friends as interpreters to minor problems. For sensitive clinical situations, or where serious decisions have to be made, the RACGP recommends using qualified medical interpreters. This recommendation is equally applicable to all clinical situations, not simply in general practice.

Professional medical interpreters

Professional medical interpreters will have a better understanding of medical terms, are more objective in their choice of language, and will be bound by a confidentiality agreement. The use of professional medical interpreters has been shown to lead to improved quality of care, better health outcomes, increased access to services, and greater patient satisfaction².

Interpreter services

The Translating and Interpreting Service (TIS) is a national service provided by the Department of Immigration and Border Protection. It aims to use interpreters accredited by the national body that sets the standards for the translating and interpreting industry in Australia. Doctors in private practice are entitled to apply for free access to TIS for patient services that are covered by Medicare, where patients are non-English speaking Australian citizens or permanent residents. Once registered with the service, you can access the Doctor's Priority Line – a free telephone interpreting service – and request onsite interpreting services. You can make bookings up to three months in advance, and cancellations must be made in writing at least 24 hours prior to the appointment or service charges may apply.

Translating and Interpreting Service – Doctors Priority Line

Call 1300 655 820 to register your practice for this service, or call 131 450 to use an interpreter over the phone.

This service:

- ▶ is FREE for Medicare-rebatable services provided to Australian citizens or permanent residents
- ▶ aims to connect a phone interpreter within three minutes
- ▶ offers both male or female interpreters on request
- ▶ allows a booking for telephone interpreter or onsite interpreters online at www.immi.gov.au.

All state health departments offer healthcare interpreting and translating services, available through a variety of means. We recommend that you identify the most appropriate translation or interpreting service for your practice and develop a protocol for reception staff so that you can make arrangements ahead of time for an appropriate person to be present at a consultation.

Tips for managing the interpreting process

- ▶ Direct your speech and any non-verbal responses to the patient, not the interpreter.
- ▶ Reinforce the message with diagrams and drawings where possible.
- ▶ If the interpreter is on the phone, allow time for the patient and the interpreter to feel comfortable and confident about the arrangement.
- ▶ As with all matters pertaining to patient care, your obligation is to explain options and provide information to help the patient make an informed decision.
- ▶ Be patient and empathic with the patient and the interpreting process.

References

1. <http://www.medicalboard.gov.au/Codes-Guidelines-Policies/Code-of-conduct.aspx> (see section 3.3)
2. Juckett, G. Appropriate use of medical interpreters. Am Fam Physician. 2014. 1:90. Available from: <http://www.aafp.org/afp/2014/1001/p476.html>

For more advice, call Avant's Medico-legal Advisory Service on **1800 128 268**.

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