

5 Tips for Working with Medical Interpreters

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Effective communication is essential to healthcare interactions at all levels. When patients have limited-English proficiency (LEP), or speak different languages, it is nearly impossible for clear communication to take place.

Interpreters provide an essential bridge to effective communication with LEP patients.



5 Tips for Working with Medical Interpreters

1. **Stay focused on the patient.**

The patient should always be your primary focus, even when the interpreter is translating. This communicates your respect for the patient and best approximates a direct conversation. It also allows you to study the patient's body language and inflection, which can provide useful information, such as his/her level of comfort and trust. While telephonic interactions do not allow for visual cues, auditory cues like tone and inflection still offer relevant information to both you and the interpreter.

2. **Speak clearly, pause frequently, and check for understanding.**

When there is a language barrier present, it is especially important to make the conversation as understandable as possible. Keeping a comfortable pace, breaking the conversation into short segments, and having the patient "play back" his/her understanding are all useful tools for ensuring clarity and comprehension. It can also be helpful to encourage the interpreter to clarify terms with you, and to "replay" the interpretation back to you if you have any concerns about accuracy.

3. **Avoid medical jargon and acronyms.**

Although it can be difficult to avoid jargon and acronyms that are second-nature to you, medical terminology can be both confusing and alienating to non-medical professionals. Many individuals will simply go along with the conversation rather than ask questions or acknowledge their lack of understanding, so it is best not to assume anything. Introduce medical terminology in plain language and always confirm understanding.

4. **Plan for extra time.**

Interpretation will necessarily double the length of your conversation, since every word will have to be spoken twice. Planning ahead can help you reduce the possibility of expressing impatience, which can be extremely detrimental to even the most basic of interactions. Being generous with your time will help build your patient's trust and confidence in your care.



increasing the chances of his or her willingness to buy into and follow-through with your instructions. One of the quickest ways to lose your patient's trust is to keep him or her out of the loop, or to interrupt while s/he is speaking. Always wait until the patient is finished talking, and address him or her of any side conversations you need to have with the interpreter.

Learn more: [Office guide to communicating with limited English proficient patients](#) | American Medical Association

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