

How Can I Work Effectively With An Interpreter?

Certified Health Care Interpreters are essential members of the health care team. Their skills and expertise are necessary to ensure that you receive information about the client's condition and that the client receives accurate health care information. When an interpreter is used for limited and non-English speaking clients, the health care worker can be assured of informed consent and informed treatment.

How do I know if my client needs an interpreter?

When in doubt, always provide a trained interpreter.

Interpretation and Translation Services facilitates informed consent and informed treatment for limited and non-English speaking patients/clients and their families. Many people may be able to communicate effectively in daily life in English as a second language, however, their English language competence may not be adequate to give or receive health care information. An untrained health care interpreter and translator can distort information through omission or deficient paraphrasing (Chng, 2000).

According to the 2002 CHR Ethno-Cultural External Consultation Report, access to interpretation was identified as the single most significant barrier to effective health care for members of the Ethno-cultural communities. Participants also recommended that the Region develop, identify, and disseminate translated health information and patient education materials.

Legal opinion in the Region suggest that a potential source of liability for the Region exists without appropriate medical interpretation/translation training for critical, complex or sensitive communications. (Business Case for: Centralized Regional In-House Interpretation and Translation Services Initiative, January, 2003)

A Certified Health Care Interpreter should be used when interactions are important to the health of the individual to ensure informed consent and informed treatment. These interactions include, but are not limited to, assessment and diagnosis, history, informed consent, health teaching, most counseling situations and abusive situations. In cases where the patient/client declines the offer of a Certified Health Care Interpreter and/or insists on using an informal (family member or friend) interpreter, these circumstances should be documented on the patient's/client's health record.

In situations where assessment has been completed and informed consent has been received for treatment and diagnostic tests, a family member, friend or other staff member may assist in simple communication during the agreed upon test or treatment. These situations may include the routine exchange of information, and simple instructions or requests.

Never use minors for interpretation.

It is required by law that professional sign language interpreters are used when client/patients and their families who communicate in American Sign Language are accessing services from the Region.

- The decision to use a trained interpreter should be made by the health care professional, not the client/patient or the family. Sometimes clients and their families are reluctant to use an interpreter for a variety of reasons; they may feel that their English is good enough to get by, they do not want to put people to extra trouble, they may be concerned that an interpreter will cost them money, or they may be unaware that an interpreter is available. If the client/patient refuses a trained interpreter, document this information on the client/patient health record and include the efforts you have made to provide a qualified interpreter.
- Be aware of your own attitudes – do you see arranging for an interpreter as a bother? Are you concerned that it will take too much time? Do you assume an interpreter will not be available? Are you reluctant to use the technology? Health care workers are often reluctant to arrange for an interpreter. Be aware of the legal, ethical and moral issues if you do not use an interpreter.
- Be aware of the smiling, nodding, complacent client, especially if they do not ask questions. Clients may present themselves as though they understand when they really do not. Some clients who speak English as a second language do not want to appear that they don't understand, or they do not want to take extra time from the care provider.
- Be wary of the client who communicates well in casual conversations. Studies show that even though many clients have sufficient English skills to communicate effectively in their daily lives and carry on a conversation, their English skills may not be adequate to understand complex medical explanations; medications, treatments, diagnoses, etc.
- Insist on using only certified health care interpreters. Do not use a family, friend or stranger as an interpreter. If the client refuses an interpreter or insists on someone other than a certified health care interpreter, make sure you document that an interpreter was offered and refused.
- It is important to know that even clients who have spoken English for years may revert back to their mother tongue during times of stress, injury or illness.

Arranging for a Certified Health Care Interpreter

- Give as much advance notice as possible. Call 403-944-0202 to book a Certified Health Care Interpreter. A dispatcher will handle your request.
- Provide the dispatcher with the name of the client and the language he/she speaks, purpose of the interview, and the topics that will be covered.
- Give the dispatcher details about the interview especially if sensitive or distressing issues will be covered.
- Give precise details about the room, building, time and how long the interpretation session is expected to last.
- Keep in mind that an interview or session when an interpreter is utilized will take a little longer than usual.

Before the interview or session

- Meet briefly with the interpreter before the session to plan the structure of the interpretation session.
- As the interpreter if there are any cultural factors that may have a bearing on the session.
- Make sure that the interpreter is treated as a valued member of the team.
- Introduce the interpreter to the client/patients and/or family of confidentiality, explain the interpretation process, inform the client/patient and family that everything that is said to him/her will be interpreted to the health care provider/health professional.

During the interview or session

- Arrange the seating in a triangle (if possible) or some configuration so that the health professional is looking at the client directly. A sign language interpreter will ideally sit beside and slightly behind the health professional to ensure the client can see both the health professional and the interpreter. In Sign Language, using facial expressions, mouthing, gestures, and body language are integral parts of communicating. These actions help give meaning to what is being signed, much like vocal tones and inflections give meaning to spoken words.
- Use a warm tone of voice and body language that will communicate to the client/patient and/or family your interest and concern.
- The interpreter should be viewed as a neutral party. The health professional should maintain eye contact with the client and address the client in the second person as if the interpreter were not even there. For example, the professional should ask "Where do you feel the pain?", rather than "Ask her where she feels the pain."
- Speak slowly and clearly. Make sure that you keep your statements or questions short and pause frequently to allow for the interpretation to occur. Use a normal volume of voice. An interview or session when an interpreter is involved will take longer. The professional must be sensitive to the fact that there may not be words in the target language that match English words, so the interpreter may need to explain what is said in a different way.
- Keep in mind that interpreters are trained to interpret everything this is aid either word for word or phrase for phrase. Therefore, do not say anything that you do not want the client to hear.
- Expect (and do not be offended!) that the interpreter will interrupt when necessary for clarification.
- Use a simple style of speech and try to avoid jargon or technical and medical terms. Sometimes there is not a word in the target language that coincides with the English word. Be prepared to repeat yourself using different words and simpler communication.
- The professional must make every effort to ensure that the client understands what is being said. It is often appropriate for the professional to summarize their comments frequently throughout the interview and ask the client to explain back to the professional what they have understood. The client should be constantly encouraged to ask questions, to comment on what they are hearing, and to tell the professional if they are unclear.

- Although it is preferable to have the interpreter present during a physical examination, ask the client whether he/she has any objections to the interpreter being present.
- When using an interpreter for a client/patient with a mental health issue, particularly with psychosis, work with the interpreter so that he/she is aware that it is possible that the client/patient will say things that do not make immediate sense.

After the interview/session

- Debrief the session with the interpreter. Find out how the interpreter thought the interview or session went and let the interpreter know how you thought the session went. Let the interpreter know what they can do to improve their skills if applicable.
- If you have any concerns or feedback about the interpreter or the session, contact the Assistant Manager – Interpretation and Translation Services at 403-944-0206. We are constantly trying to improve our services and appreciate hearing your comments.
- You may be asked by the interpreter to complete an evaluation form to help us evaluate and improve our services.
- Tell your co-workers and colleagues about our services! We find that word-of-mouth is the best way of communicating information about our services to Calgary Health Region staff.