

Shifting Care Delivery Models Brings Medical Interpreting Front & Center

In the medical world, language barriers create problems for both patients and providers. For patients, language and communication influence how and if Limited-English-Proficient (LEP) patients access and experience health care. Because of language barriers, LEP patients often encounter basic problems such as lack of awareness of existing services, how to access them as well as inadequate communication with health care providers.



BY ELIZABETH COLÓN

Though language barriers have long been a concern for health professionals, the debate over what qualifies as adequate supplementary language services for LEP patients has been especially heated in recent years. As healthcare systems aim to provide enhanced service to their patients, abide to Federal regulations such as TITLE VI and the American Disabilities Act (ADA), meet the standards of the Joint Commission and become assimilated to their diverse communities, healthcare systems are becoming more proactive about getting educated on the need for medical interpreting by qualified professionals.

With the current administration taking a harder look at institutes whom do not meet Federal Regulations and because of the increase of the Non-English speaking populations being served, healthcare systems are across the board looking at the need to budget for language services. And budgeting is just one area of concern. Understanding what it entails to comply to Federal Regulations and providing the most effective

communication possible to patients is high on the list of concerns. In January 2010, The Joint Commission released new

standards concerning patient-provider communication that went into effect in early 2011. One standard specifically addresses qualifications for language interpreters and translators. With new regulations being passed down, hospitals need to be diligent in their staffing and partnering with medical interpreters.

Seeking Qualified Medical Interpreters

As a medical interpreting provider to some of the largest healthcare facilities in Chicago, we have seen first-hand how these services comes into play in all facets of the healthcare model including in Patient & Family Center Care initiatives and Magnet certification.

If a hospital chooses to seek an outside vendor for interpreting services, what types of considerations should be made when seeking a partnership with a language services company? Seek a firm with medical interpreting expertise. While there is no mandatory certification in the medical interpreting field, interpreters should be required to be tested for oral and written proficiency prior to entering a medical interpreting training. Specific medical interpreting training should also be mandatory, including the importance of following the standards of practice, what role they should play in patient care, and the importance of HIPAA and confidentiality.

A qualified medical interpreting partner should be able to provide your organization with:

- Assistance in implementing the new Joint Commission standards.
- Availability to assess staff or provide training on how to work with interpreters.
- More than one option for interpreter

services, i.e. telephone, on-site, video remote interpreting.

Qualifying & Training

Whether a healthcare system has in-house medical interpreters or contracted language professionals, they all should meet a strict list of criteria as a qualified medical interpreter. In order to successfully interact with patients and favorably represent your facility, interpreters should clearly understand expectations and standards. Here are a few tips for patient/medical staff interactions with interpreters:

- Interpreters must always obey by the code of confidentiality.
- Where interpreters position themselves is important. The relationship is always between the patient and service provider. An interpreter who remains on the side of the provider can make the patient feel helpless and alone.
- Interpreters must be conduits of information only and refrain from taking on the role of a social worker, friend or health professional.
- Just interpreting isn't enough. An interpreter must always be prepared for their assignment. Before going to an assignment, a good interpreter will research the information in advance so that they are fully prepared and aware of the terminology that might be used.

Bottom line, medical interpreting is more than just translating spoken words from one language to another; it involves conveying messages, cultural nuances, and promoting understanding between medical staff and patients from different backgrounds.

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