Communicating with older people from non-English speaking backgrounds

**Introduction**

Interpreters, families and friends all have distinctive roles in facilitating communication between Health Professionals and older people from Non English speaking backgrounds (NESB).

Clear communication between patients and health professionals is necessary in order to make decisions about healthcare choices and avoid adverse outcomes.

It is mandated by NSW Health Policy 1 that professional Health Care Interpreters be used to facilitate communication between people with no or limited English and staff working in health services. Patients, families and carers have a right to free, professional interpreters and should be informed of their right to this service.

In exploring arrangements for communication with older people from NESB, it was established that critical incidents of miscommunication may occur when family and friends are utilised to interpret. For this purpose, a study was conducted at Western and South Western Sydney Local Health Districts (LHD). The study involved surveys with 223 Health Professionals, 92 family/friends and 117 older people from NESB. 2 As a result, two fact sheets were developed; one targeting health professionals and the other older people and their family/friends.

**NSW Health Care Interpreters are**

- Bound by the Australian Institute of Interpreters and Translators Code of Ethics
- Trained in medical terminology
- Available 24/7. Booking is essential
- Interpreters for all facilities must be booked through HCIS, including Translating and Interpreting Services (TIS)
- Different modes of interpreting are available, e.g. face to face, phone

**Considerations for Health Professionals**

Family, friends and carers play a key role in advocating for a patient. They have a role in assisting with basic communication (menu choices, toileting and patient’s discomfort/pain). Interpreters require a specialist linguistic skills, training and emotional detachment from the patient. It is difficult for family and friends to play the dual role of an interpreter and family member/carer at the same time. If a patient refuses a Healthcare Interpreter, explain that there is no cost to them and that an interpreter is essential for accuracy and impartiality. Having a professional interpreter present is also the right of a Health Professional. If the patient still insists on using family/friends, it must be recorded in their medical record.

When a patient accesses a health service accompanied by other people, Health Professionals should clarify the relationship— are they a Carer or a support person? A support person will have less regular contact and knowledge of the patient’s needs while a carer or close family/friend will have greater knowledge. Health Professionals need to consider the carer’s health and wellbeing and to establish what the patient is comfortable to discuss in front of the family member, carer or support person.

"It is hard to know whether family or friends are interpreting correctly so I do not use them for information about medical procedures or consults."

"Using family carers or friends does not protect a patient’s privacy. It may also potentially limit the patient’s understanding of their care options."

"Family and friends can be utilised for basic communication with patients, to help settle them and to provide broad messaging."

"An interpreter ensures patient has full disclosure without bias."

"An interpreter enables patient to be an active participant in their healthcare."

"Hello"
This table should assist Health Professionals to understand the differing roles and their risks and benefits in providing quality, equitable and safe healthcare utilising the person centred care approach. 3

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Issue</th>
<th>Health Professional Role</th>
<th>Interpreter Role</th>
<th>Family &amp; Friends Role</th>
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| **Emergency situation**  
*Most HCIS have an emergency priority line for targeted or critical services. These departments have been provided with a designated line and number. Contact HCIS first, however TIS can be used as a back-up service.* | Attempt to get immediate access to an interpreter. If unable to do so, attend to critical situation then book interpreter to confirm diagnosis and treatment | Interpreters need to abide by duty of care as outlined in NSW Health Code of Conduct 4 | Adult family member to assist with communication between the clinician and the patient |
| **Informed Consent** | It is part of the duty of care and legal responsibility of a Health Professional to use a professional interpreter to ensure consent is valid | Need to sign to indicate their presence and participation | Using family for consent means risking serious mistakes and giving the family inappropriate responsibilities |
| **Assessment and Diagnosis** | To obtain information directly from the patient, confirm patients’ understanding and to allow patients to ask questions | To interpret for the patient and Health Professionals | Close family or Carers can provide additional information to assist clinicians |
| **Treatment and Management** | Health Professionals should use an interpreter to obtain a patients full history and explain all aspects of treatment | To interpret for the patient and Health Professionals | Close family and Carers have a role in assisting patients to understand, manage and comply with their ongoing treatment |
| **Confidentiality** | To abide by NSW Health code of conduct. 4 | To abide by Australian Institute of Interpreters and Translators (AUSIT) Code of Ethics and employers Code of Conduct |
| **Accuracy of both languages** | To clarify language (dialect) needed by the patient and the family when booking | Obtain and maintain accreditation/certification with National Accreditation Authority for Translators and Interpreters (NAATI) in English and community language |
| **Accuracy of medical information** | Clarify in simple language any medical or health information that cannot be translated easily into the community language | Must complete training in medical and health terminology. To seek clarification from the health care professional around terminology which they are not familiar with |

**Health Care Interpreter Service Contact Details**

South Western Sydney 8738 6088  
Western Sydney 9912 3800  
Sydney 9515 0030  
Rural and Regional 1800 674 994  
Illawarra 4223 8540  
Shoalhaven/Murrumbidgee and Southern NSW 1800 247 272

**Suggestions for further reading**

2. The Role of Family and Friends in Communicating with Older People from a non-English speaking background (NESB) Project Report  

This project is a partnership between South Western and Western Sydney LHDs. The contributing services included South Western Sydney LHD Health Promotion Service, Health Language Services, Braeside Hospital and Hammond Care. The Western Sydney services included Multicultural Health, Translation Service, Social Work and Clinical Governance.