

Guidelines on using interpreters in medical situations

How do I know if an interpreter is needed?

- Ask a few open-ended questions, something that needs an answer that is more than just “yes” or “no” e.g. “Can you explain the route you took to get here this morning?”; “What is your reason for calling/visiting today?”
- Ask the client to repeat instructions back to you—if they can’t manage this, an interpreter is probably a good idea. For example, “You need to take this tablet three times a day with food”.
- Pick up indicative body language e.g. extra nervousness.
- As a general rule of thumb, if you don’t understand the client or you feel that the message is not getting through it’s time to get an interpreter.
- Use the “Do you need a trained interpreter?” poster and ask the person to point to which language they prefer using.
- NB: Asking if the person needs an interpreter probably won’t help.

How do I work with an interpreter?

The basics:

- Arrange the seating so that the interpreter is to one side, and you are facing the patient directly.
- Speak directly to the patient as if the interpreter is not there—ignore the interpreter completely (i.e. avoid “Interpreter, please ask Fatimeh ...”)
- Speak clearly and unhurriedly
- Take turns to speak
- Pause every couple of sentences
- Wait until the interpreter has finished before continuing.

More detailed speaking suggestions:

- Use your normal speaking tone - speaking louder does not help
- Use plain English where possible, avoiding complex terminology and acronyms.
- Use short, simple sentences, aiming for fewer than sixteen words.
- Ask one question at a time.
- Use active rather than passive voice, e.g. “I will check your blood pressure”, rather than “Your blood pressure needs to be checked”.
- Avoid colloquialisms (e.g. we’ll flag that), and idioms (e.g. kick the bucket) - there may not be equivalents in the other language.
- Use specific rather than general terms, e.g. “daily” rather than “frequent”.
- If you use conditional verbs (could, would), check the patient’s understanding - they may not translate exactly into the other language.

Other best practice ideas:

- Use diagrams, pictures or translated written material to increase understanding.
- Summarise periodically, particularly when complex issues are involved.
- Check the patient's understanding (via the interpreter), just as you would for an English-speaking patient :
 - Ask them to repeat instructions
 - Have them explain back to you in their own words what you just said
 - Ask them open-ended questions about the information you provided.
- Don't make comments that you don't want interpreted. The person may understand more than you realise.
- If the patient needs another appointment, make the arrangements with them while the interpreter is still there.
- Debrief the interpreter if the session was emotionally taxing (this needs to be after the patient has left).

Be aware of the limits to the interpreter's role:

- The interpreter is present only to remove the language barrier, not to carry out other tasks, check that the patient understands, or act as a support person for the client
- The interpreter is impartial—avoid asking for his/her opinion or comment
- Maintain control of the interview by checking the client's understanding yourself—ask exploratory questions that can be interpreted (see above)
- Everything said will be interpreted—don't ask the interpreter to summarise or report on the main points after the fact
- Avoid engaging in personal conversation with the interpreter.

How do I know if an interpreter is competent?

- The interpreter uses direct speech and idiomatic English
- The message is neither excessively longer nor shorter than the original
- The client's responses are meaningful, and there's no indication of confusion*
- Smooth flow of information both ways, and body language matches message*
- The interpreter takes notes, asks for clarification or repetition when needed
- The interpreter reports any side conversations.

To book a trained interpreter:

- phone **(04) 384 2849** or **0508 468 377**
- book online: www.interpret.org.nz/book-an-interpreter
- e-mail: request@interpret.org.nz

* only if your client is articulate