



IMIA Guide on Working with Medical Interpreters

A medical interpreter is a trained professional bound by a code of ethics. The interpreter is there to interpret communication, and can neither add nor delete any information at any time. However, since interpreting is more than converting equivalent terms, sometimes a small utterance in the source language might require a long utterance in the target language. Interpreters will act in the capacity of several roles, of which four will be described in this guide. The role of conduit is when they are interpreting into one or another language. The role of clarifier is when they have to intervene in order to clarify a term or concept in order to proceed. The role of cultural interface involves intervening when a cultural context needs to be explored to aid communication. The role of patient advocate is a role in which interpreters engage mostly outside the interpreted encounter, empowering patients to access all the health services they require. It is not to be confused with representing the interests of or taking the side of the patient in a provider-patient interaction.

Pre-Session

- A good cultural and linguistic match between patient and interpreter can avoid many potential problems. If possible, when requesting an interpreter consider: (social/ethnic issues, dialects)
- Learn how the patient prefers to be called
- Discuss eye contact, seating/positioning
- Establish a rapport with the interpreter
- Explain the purpose of the session
- Encourage the interpreter to ask clarifying questions (clarifier role) for accuracy
- Ask the interpreter to explain the nature of any independent conversation with the client or you to the other party during the session to promote transparency and impartiality of all parties
- Make sure you have forms in the client's care language and or go over the non-translated form with the interpreter carefully before the interview

During Session

- Allow interpreters to introduce themselves and "screen" client's speech
- Allow the interpreter to best position themselves to promote direct eye contact between provider/patient wherever possible.
- Do not make comments to the interpreter that you don't mean to be interpreted to the patient.

- Let the interpreter explain the ground rules for communicating with an interpreter:
 - Everything said by both parties will be interpreted
 - Speak in short phrases so the interpreter will be able to interpret more easily
 - Tell the patient that what they say is confidential; will not reveal anything about the interview
 - Ask the patient if they have any questions about the interpreting process
- Talk to your client by talking to them in the first person and not in the third person as in "Tell him xyz".
- Be patient, and encourage the interpreter's understanding
- Respect the interpreter's judgment, if the interpreter insists that a question is inappropriate, discuss it after the session
- Use time efficiently
- Use simple language and avoid jargon, technical terms, and slang, it is the provider's responsibility to ensure that the patient is understanding via teach back and other methods
- Speak in a normal tone and speed. Speak in the first and second persons only (not third person).
 - Correct: "What medications are you taking?"
 - Incorrect: "Please ask him what medications he is taking?"

Post-Session

- Discuss issues that could not be adequately discussed during the session
- Thank the interpreter

More Tips

- Do not jump to linguistic conclusions, things may not always mean what they seem
- An interpreter who is prepared with a dictionary or taking notes is acting professionally
- Language learning is binary – a patient who has some English speaking ability may not necessarily be able to understand everything. A patient who asks for an interpreter may be able to understand and use quite a bit of English
- Likewise, a provider who has some Spanish speaking ability may not be able to understand everything a patient says, and to ensure accurate communication. Interpreter assistance is encouraged unless the provider is completely fluent in the patient's language, mostly for patient safety purposes.
- Providers should get tested to know their proficiency level in a particular language