

Working with Interpreters in Health Settings

1. Relevant guidelines and legislation

There is extensive international and national legislation that advocates for equality of access to health and legal services, although in many instances the use of interpreters is not always clearly articulated. Legal frameworks that advocate for equality of access to health services include:

- ✚ European Convention for the Protection of Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms (1950)
- ✚ The United Nations Convention of the Rights of the Child (1989)
- ✚ Human Rights Act (1998)
- ✚ Equality Act 2010
- ✚ The Disability Discrimination Act (1995) and the Disability Discrimination Act (2005)

2. Booking/finding an interpreter

2.1. Language Needs Analysis

- ✚ This might include obtaining baseline data on the language needs of the communities you serve, and a review of the languages used by relevant clinical staff to ensure that they make optimal use of the language resources you have available.
- ✚ Your organisation should also consider whether the needs of your population are best served by employing interpreters, advocates or bilingual link workers directly or by using external interpreting services.

2.2. Locating an appropriate interpreter

- ✚ As stated, it is a matter for each organisation/service provider to decide whether to employ a team of in-house interpreters and health advocates or use an interpreting agency, ensuring that any interpreting agency meets the appropriate quality criteria and is accredited by the relevant body.
- ✚ The professional concerned should find out the client's first language and try to book an interpreter who speaks this language, ideally from the same country, and when necessary a speaker of the same dialect as the client.
- ✚ Do not assume that someone who speaks a language can speak/understand it in all the.
- ✚ A guide to languages by country can be found at www.ethnologue.com/country_index.asp. The interpreter should not only be fluent in two languages but have an understanding of the two different cultural contexts.
- ✚ Ideally, they should have undergone recognised language testing to ensure that they are fluent and have relevant experience for the task.

- ✚ In Britain, the Register of Public Service Interpreters www.nrpsi.co.uk , the Institute of Linguists, www.iol.org.uk

3. Preparation before the consultation/meeting

- ✚ Try to spend some time considering all the implications of working with a third person (the language or sign language interpreter/bicultural worker) before the consultation/ meeting.
- ✚ It can be useful to discuss this with an experienced interpreter or, failing that, with colleagues who have experience of working with interpreters.
- ✚ The service provider should have written guidelines and a contract that interpreters are asked to adhere to and ideally sign.
- ✚ You may need to ensure that your interpreter signs the contract of your organisation or their professional body; this should cover such aspects as confidentiality, roles, responsibilities, ethics and boundaries.
- ✚ For example, it is important that the service user maintains self-determination in the same way as any other service user and all parties should ensure that this is not compromised by an interpreter being involved.

4. Practical considerations

- ✚ The implications of using mediated communication need to be considered prior to any meeting with a client. For example:
 - ✚ Remember the meeting may take longer when working with an interpreter and consider allocating additional time in advance of the meeting.
 - ✚ Avoid using complicated technical language.
 - ✚ Words and signs do not always have precise equivalents, and a short sentence in English may take several sentences to explain in another language or vice versa.
 - ✚ Do not become impatient if the interpreter takes longer to interpret than you would have expected.
 - ✚ Be wary of using proverbs and sayings. If something does not make literal sense, it is usually best avoided.
 - ✚ Clinicians should also be aware that it can become easy to lose concentration or to lose the thread of the session as the pace becomes slower and perhaps disjointed, given the space needed for interpretation.

5. Preparation with the interpreter

- ✚ You should always aim to arrange a pre-session interview with the interpreter.
- ✚ Spend 10 or 15 minutes on the first occasion to establish a relationship, decide how you will work together, explain the objectives of the meeting and share any relevant background information.

- ✚ This is an essential investment. This may also be an opportunity to clarify technical concepts, vocabulary or jargon, which is likely to be used.

6. During the meeting/consultation

- ✚ The client may initially be uncomfortable with an interpreter being present, perhaps because of concerns about confidentiality and information reaching other members of their community, or they may be embarrassed.
- ✚ It may help to explain at the beginning of the first meeting that the interpreter is a professional doing their job, has no decision-making powers and is bound by the confidentiality policy of the agency and their professional body.
- ✚ You may also wish to explain the limits of confidentiality, which relate to your place of work, for example the need to report active suicidal ideation, etc.
- ✚ Clients can put interpreters under considerable pressure to take on additional roles, for example to become involved in advocacy on their behalf, etc. Making clear issues of accountability and explaining the role of each party and the limitations of their responsibility assist in containing such pressures.
- ✚ Look at the client as much as feels natural, rather than at the interpreter unless speaking specifically to the interpreter.
- ✚ In general, we tend to move our eyes in a natural way between speakers but it is important to be aware of the three-way relationship and make sure that the client does not feel excluded.
- ✚ If your client has hearing difficulties, as stated above, it is important that you use your body positioning and eye contact to facilitate communication as much as possible.

7. After the consultation/meeting

- ✚ When the session is finished, you may need to sign the interpreter's time sheet if they work for an external agency.
- ✚ Interpreters often prefer to leave after the client so that they do not feel pressurised to get involved in a personal relationship or in helping or acting as an advocate for the client in other situations.
- ✚ Showing the client out and then signing the form can facilitate this. It also offers a structured opportunity and some time for debriefing.
- ✚ Schedule 10 minutes with your interpreter after the session to review how you worked together and any other issues relevant to the session (if the interpreter is being paid on a timed basis, this time must be included).

This time can be used to:

- Allow time to ask the interpreter their perceptions of the meeting and to inform you of any cultural factors that may be relevant and that you may have missed. This also allows you to check with them about anything you

may have noticed, for example from non-verbal communication or expressions.

- Allow you to ask them about any areas that are unclear to you and which their knowledge of the home country or region, or hearing of the account first hand could clarify.
- Ask the interpreter how it was working with you and whether you could usefully change anything in the way you are working (e.g. pace of speaking, length of speaking).
- Do a structured debriefing – as stated above, it may be hard for the interpreter to debrief anywhere else because of their code of confidentiality. There is often no in-house supervision for interpreters.
- You may wish to provide the interpreter with some contact details in case they need to de-brief at a later stage about your session, remaining mindful of the risks of distress and vicarious traumatisation that the interpreter might face.

8. Written translations

- ✚ All written translations should be back-translated (i.e. documents being translated from one language into another by one translator and then translated back to the original language by a different translator, the two versions then being compared).
- ✚ This can appear a costly and time-consuming business but can ensure that the translation is clear and states what it is intended to state.
- ✚ There have been many examples of incorrect and sometimes incomprehensible translated versions of English documents, and it is well worth the additional effort of further checks to ensure your message is adequately translated.
- ✚ This may be particularly important when assessment report is being reported as a legal case.

9. Telephone interpreting

- ✚ There is sometimes pressure on clinicians to use telephone interpreting, which can be assumed to be easier to manage, quicker or cheaper.
- ✚ While it may have a role, it is not without its own dilemmas and often does not make things any less costly.
- ✚ Most interpreting agencies charge by the minute or a number of minutes for telephone interpreting and by the hour for face-to face interpreting, making charging by the minute far more expensive.
- ✚ In some cases, it can be helpful to use a telephone interpreter. For example, one advantage is that confidentiality is safeguarded to a higher degree when the interpreter and client do not meet face-to-face.
- ✚ This may be helpful when the client comes from an ethnic group which is very small or they are very embarrassed about needing an interpreter or have an issue which they have difficulty expressing.

- ✚ It can also be helpful for rearranging appointments or other forms of negotiation when face-to-face interpreters are unable to attend for any reason.
- ✚ It is also useful when a client arrives unexpectedly and requires a brief consultation or perhaps an immediate risk assessment or where the need for conveying test results is necessary.

Some recommendations for practice

- ✚ If you have not undertaken training in working with interpreters, undertake a training course, if this is really not feasible, as you will be working with an interpreter unexpectedly, read the guidelines and allocate time to consider the issues or discuss them with a more experienced colleague in advance of your first session with an interpreter.
- ✚ Check that the interpreter is qualified and appropriate for the consultation/meeting.
- ✚ Allocate 10–15 minutes in advance of the session to brief the interpreter about the purpose of the meeting and to enable them to brief you about any cultural issues, which may have bearing on the session.
- ✚ Be mindful of issues of confidentiality and trust when working with someone from a small language community (including the deaf community) as the client may be anxious about being identifiable and mistrustful of an interpreter's professionalism.
- ✚ State clearly that you alone hold clinical responsibility for the meeting.
- ✚ Create a good atmosphere where each member feels able to ask for clarification if anything is unclear and be respectful to your interpreter, they are an important member of the team who makes your work possible.
- ✚ Match when appropriate for gender and age, do not use a relative and never use a child.
- ✚ Be aware of the well-being of your interpreter and the possibility of your interpreter suffering from vicarious traumatisation; consider what support they will be offered.
- ✚ At the end of the session, allocate 10 minutes to debrief the interpreter about the session and offer support and supervision as appropriate.

Further reading

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