

Medical Healthcare Interpreter Training



Instructor Manual
InterpreterEd.com

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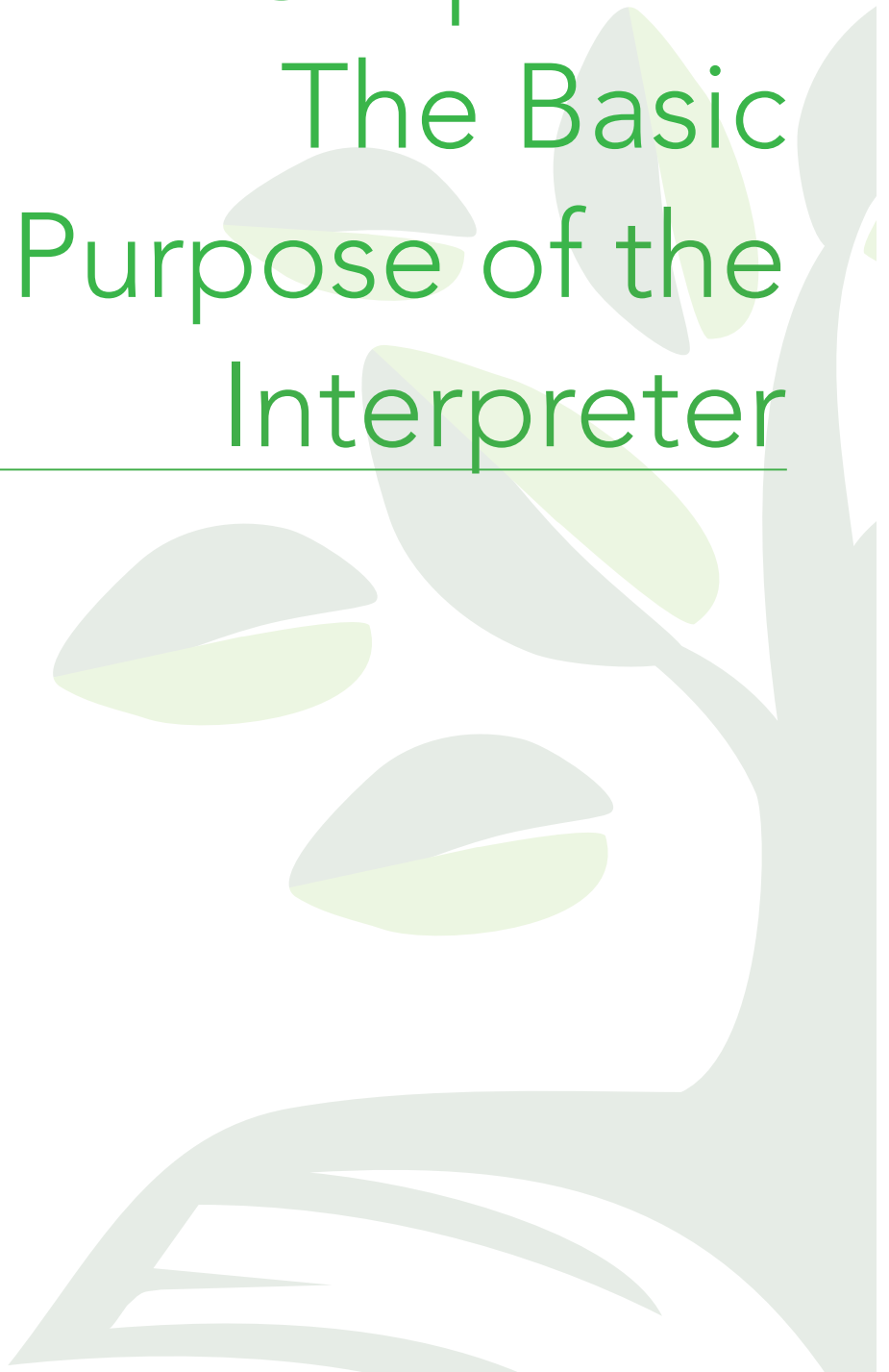
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Chapter 1: The Basic Purpose of the Interpreter



A Highly Valued Member of the Healthcare Team

As a healthcare interpreter, your role is essential to communicating accurate information for diagnosis and treatment. Your training and expertise will play a key role in patients' health, and you could literally save someone's life.

The following examples are tragic, real-life cases that may have been avoided with professional healthcare interpreting.



The \$71 Million Word

“Intoxicado.” This single, misunderstood word cost Willie Ramirez the use of his arms and legs. In 1981, the 18-year-old suddenly suffered a severe headache and passed out. Friends with limited English-speaking ability tried to help when emergency responders arrived. But the word they used was “intoxicado,” a word that has more than one meaning within the Cuban community.

Tragically, the non-Spanish speaking emergency medical personnel and the emergency room doctor thought “intoxicado” meant “intoxicated.” Consequently, Ramirez was treated for a drug overdose. He was not correctly diagnosed or treated for a brain aneurysm until two days later. In addition to the life-long medical consequences Ramirez suffered, this simple, misunderstanding resulted in a landmark \$71 million insurance settlement.

Lost In Translation

13-year-old Gricelda Zamora served as an interpreter for her non-English speaking parents. But when Gricelda, herself, became ill, she was too sick to adequately describe her stomach pain to hospital personnel. The hospital emergency department diagnosed gastritis and told her family to follow up with a doctor the next day. Her parents did so, and brought a 14-year-old friend along to interpret for them. But that girl, too, was unable to adequately communicate Gricelda's symptoms. By the time her parents took Gricelda back to the hospital, it was too late. She died within hours of a ruptured appendix.

Now compare these cases with the next example, which illustrates the benefits of professional healthcare interpreting to both patients and providers. This patient's experience clearly illustrates the impact professional healthcare interpreting may have on quality of life, as well as reducing healthcare costs. In this real-life scenario, the same patient had two vastly different experiences.

A Tale of Two ER Visits

An older, Spanish-speaking woman entered an emergency room suffering from severe facial pain. A nurse with limited Spanish-speaking skills asked whether she was allergic to any type of medications. The patient said, "No alergico," and continued on in Spanish to explain that she was sensitive to a particular type of pain medication.



The nurse only heard "not allergic," and did not understand the rest of what the patient said. As a result, that patient was given medication to which she was sensitive. She became physically ill, spent eight hours in the emergency department, and was ultimately hospitalized for two days.

A month later, the same patient returned to the hospital in pain — but this time with a healthcare interpreter. When the nurse asked about medication allergies, the patient was able to explain her sensitivity to certain types of pain medication, and the interpreter conveyed the message accurately in English. This time, the patient was prescribed a different pain medication.

As a result of this improved communication, the patient only spent two hours in the emergency room instead of eight. She was not hospitalized. The patient went home with her pain in control and very satisfied.

In addition to improved patient satisfaction, professional healthcare interpreting resulted in significant cost savings to the hospital. No hospitalization was necessary, and the patient needed:

- Less time in the emergency room
- Fewer medical tests
- Less medication

Benefits of Professional Healthcare Interpreting Services

Many healthcare professionals have come to understand the undeniable benefit of the professional healthcare interpreting services in the delivery of safe and effective medical care. The benefits of accurate and complete healthcare interpreting have been well documented by several peer-reviewed studies and professional reports.

- **Fewer errors and reduced patient risks.** A landmark 2003 study found that the medical errors that occur without trained interpreters have consequences. Patients with limited language abilities who requested trained healthcare interpreters were not at such increased risk.
- **Reduced volume and complexity of diagnostic tests.** Without the presence of a healthcare interpreter, medical providers are likely to order additional tests to ensure they don't "miss anything." One study showed that children of parents who were not proficient in English had more tests and spent more time in the emergency room.
- **Increased quality of healthcare, patient satisfaction and outcomes.** Multiple studies have shown that professional healthcare interpreters improve the quality of care for patients with limited English-speaking ability. Not only is there a reduced risk for errors, but patients report higher satisfaction and better outcomes.
- **Improved disease management.** A study of Spanish-speaking patients with asthma found that those who had bilingual physicians were more likely to take medication as directed, keep scheduled office appointments, and visit the emergency room less often.
- **Improved patient compliance with treatment plans and self care.** For chronic conditions, language appears to be a barrier to managing self care at home. A study of children and adolescents with asthma found those from Spanish-speaking homes had lower rates of goal setting and peak flow monitoring. They also were less knowledgeable about their asthma.

“Interpreter” or “Translator”?

The difference is simple, yet very important. Interpretation is done orally. Translation involves writing. Occasionally, an interpreter may be required to perform some “sight translation.” You’ll learn more about those situations in Chapter 6.

Your Purpose

The healthcare interpreter facilitates understanding and communication between a patient and a provider who speak different languages – and possibly have vastly different world views. Professional healthcare interpreting is where both those worlds meet. The healthcare interpreter must understand the cultures of both the patient and the healthcare setting. This is essential for the patient to receive the most effective healthcare.

- **Improved provider and staff productivity.** According to the American Academy of Family Physicians, the physician is ultimately responsible for communicating with the patient. A trained professional healthcare interpreter is the best alternative for physicians who are not bilingual.
- **Increased federal and state regulatory compliance.** The U.S. Department of Health and Human Services' Office of Minority Health has developed national standards on Culturally and Linguistically Appropriate Services (CLAS). Following these 14 standards helps healthcare organizations meet federal, state and regulatory requirements.

About "Ad Hoc" Interpreters

However well-intended, "ad hoc" healthcare interpreting by an untrained friend, relative or child is no substitute for professional services. Sometimes a bilingual staff person, who has other primary duties, is called in or offers to interpret. That is not optimal either. Errors made by ad-hoc interpreters have more potential clinical consequences than those committed by hospital interpreters. The CLAS standards developed by the U. S. Department of Health and Human Services require healthcare organizations "to assure the competence of language assistance provided to limited English proficient patients and consumers by interpreters and bilingual staff." Professional training usually begins with a minimum 40-hour class. Additional study and preparation may be required to eventually achieve certification.

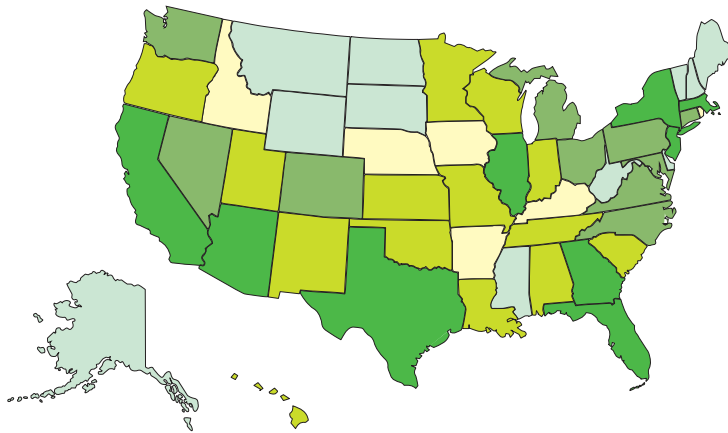
An “At Risk” Patient Population

About 25 million Americans are classified as “limited English proficient” (LEP). This means they cannot speak, read, write or understand the English language well enough to effectively interact with healthcare providers.

As a result of this language barrier, LEP individuals face serious challenges in accessing appropriate healthcare. They may receive substandard healthcare because of inaccurate or incomplete information.

LEP individuals often put off necessary medical care and are less likely to have a regular healthcare provider. They are at higher risk of leaving a hospital against medical advice and are more likely to miss follow-up appointments. LEP patients are also less likely to take medication as directed by a healthcare provider.

State Shares of the U.S. LEP Population, 2012



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LEP persons in the U.S.: 25.1 million

27.1% 8% to 14% 2% to 7.9% 1% to 1.9% less than 1%

Source: U.S. Census Bureau, 2008-2012 American Community Survey © 2014 InterpreterEd.com

As many as one in five Spanish-speaking Latinos reports not seeking medical care because of language barriers. LEP patients are often challenged by:

- Difficulty communicating their medical histories and understanding healthcare instructions.
- Difficulty asking questions about their condition and care.
- Inadequate interpreting services, which can have particularly serious consequences for those with mental disorders.
- Medical decisions made for them without their knowledge, understanding and consent.
- Higher costs because of expensive, otherwise avoidable medical testing.
- Higher costs because of under-utilized, less-expensive preventive healthcare services.
- Providers who have difficulty understanding cultural observances that may affect their treatment.
- Providers who may avoid them because of liability fears.
- Providers who are unfamiliar with cultural norms and power structure.

Medical Mistakes Happen

A 2006 study by the Institute of Medicine (IOM) reported 1.5 million medication errors are made every year. This figure did not take into account misunderstandings due to language. The medical costs of treating drug-related injuries occurring in hospitals alone conservatively amounts to \$3.5 billion each year. Healthcare providers across the country are taking IOM-recommended steps to ensure patients are fully informed about drug regimens and to minimize opportunities for error. Clear and accurate healthcare interpreting by trained interpreters supports these patient safety efforts.

An Ounce of Prevention

Language difficulties and inadequate funding of language services are major barriers to LEP individuals' access to healthcare and a serious threat to the quality of the care they receive. Communications breakdowns are responsible for the nearly 3,000 unexpected deaths, catastrophic injuries and other sentinel events reported each year, according to The Joint Commission. Additionally, LEP patients may suffer a greater percentage of adverse events as a result of such language breakdowns.

Goals of the Medical Interpreter

Three “Simple” Rules

There are three basic rules of healthcare interpreting, and they are deceptively simple.

DON'T OMIT ANY WORDS.	DON'T ADD SOMETHING THAT WAS NOT SAID.	DON'T CHANGE THE MEANING OF THE WORDS.
The healthcare interpreter must be able to accurately convey every word that is spoken so that both the LEP patient and the healthcare provider receive complete, accurate information.	The healthcare interpreter must take care to convey only the words that were actually spoken.	The healthcare interpreter must ask for clarification or explanation when unfamiliar words are used in order to avoid inadvertently changing the intended meaning.

Healthcare interpreters must have and demonstrate sufficient language skills in at least two languages. Additionally, they must know about medical terminology, confidentiality, ethics, HIPAA and the role of the interpreter in order to do this job correctly. This means:

Reliability — Convey the meaning of the original message in the new language.

Completeness — Make sure nothing is omitted and nothing is added to the original message.

Accuracy — Convey the content and spirit of what is said, taking into consideration the linguistic variations in both languages.

Cultural Appropriateness — Make sure the message of the message is meaningful and appropriate.

Common Interpretation Errors

Omission

Errors of omission occur when the interpreter leaves out a word or words. For example, if an interpreter doesn't know the correct words for "colonoscopy study," and consequently leaves out the word for "colonoscopy." When the provider asks the patient to disrobe, it is news to the patient. All the patient heard and understood was "a study."

On the other hand, when an interpreter cannot clearly communicate a patient's symptoms, the physician may not be able to make a proper diagnosis with vague, limited information. "My back hurts" could have several meanings for a provider. Additional tests may be required to rule out possible causes, increasing the costs of treating the patient.

Every Word Matters

Consider the Spanish-speaking patient who says, "Doctor, tengo un dolor de cabeza en la nuca, es constante y aumenta de intensidad durante el día, además siento los nervios hechos bola. El dolor es tan fuerte que no puedo hacer nada." If the healthcare interpreter stops after interpreting, "Doctor, tengo un dolor de cabeza," or "Doctor, I have a headache," some very important information is left out. A more complete and correct interpretation would be, "Doctor, I have a headache in the posterior part of my head. It is always present and it increases in intensity during the day. I also feel my nerves are all tense. The pain is so strong that I can't do anything."

Without this complete information about the type and location of the pain, the doctor may misdiagnose and mistreat the patient. Misdiagnosed patients are understandably less likely to be satisfied with their care. They are also less likely to return — if they come back at all.

Addition

Errors of addition may happen when an interpreter is trying to fill in perceived gaps in communication. For example, a provider may say, "Apply the cream on the face twice a day." The interpreter may convey, "Apply the cream on the face and whole body."

As the healthcare interpreter, your primary responsibility is to convey only the information that was expressed by either the patient or provider. Adding new information to what the patient said could lead to the wrong diagnosis

Chapter: 1

and treatment. Conversely, elaborating on the healthcare provider's words may lead to the patient misunderstanding the diagnosis, recommended treatment and follow-up care. Adding on to the provider's words may alter the patient's understanding of a situation. The patient may experience undue worry or fail to realize the seriousness of a condition.

Change of Meaning

Every language has different, sometimes colorful ways of explaining the same concept. If someone asked a native English speaker to “stick out your paw,” that person would likely understand the person wants to shake hands.

The same is true in other languages. For example, the Spanish words for “doll” and “popsicles” are the same as those for “wrists” and “shoulder blades.” A non-bilingual and bicultural emergency department provider or nurse may not understand the patient who comes in describing pain in the “dolls and popsicles.” Without this cultural understanding, the hospital staff may completely miss evaluating the pain in the wrists and shoulder blades, and instead refer the patient out for a mental health evaluation.



Chapter 1 in Review

Key Concepts

- The U.S. has always been and continues to be a nation of immigrants.
- About 23 million individuals in the U.S. are classified as limited English proficient (LEP.)
- Healthcare organizations are required to provide healthcare interpreting services in order to meet federal, state and regulatory standards.
- Healthcare interpreting requires professional training — just being bilingual is not enough.
- Even one misunderstood word may have devastating or deadly consequences.
- Accurate healthcare interpreting reduces costs while also saving lives.
- Patients who receive the benefit of professional healthcare interpreting are likely to be healthier, take medication correctly, and receive follow-up care.
- Professionally trained healthcare interpreters are an indispensable part of the healthcare team.

Activities

1. What Are Your Goals?

Take a moment to think about your goals. Why are you taking this healthcare interpreting class? What are your expectations of this course, and where do you expect to apply this knowledge?

2. Find The Right Words

- Are there words you know that are often misunderstood by those who speak only one language? Is there a better way to say them or to clarify what you mean?
- Are there certain English words that you've noticed are frequently misunderstood by patients? What are they? What do you do when this happens?



