

Fact Sheet 8

Working with an interpreter

The role of the interpreter

An interpreter is someone who makes communication between people clear. The interpreter should not add or subtract to the communication, only interpret what is being said.

An interpreter should maintain confidentiality and not disclose information received in the course of a conversation.

An interpreter is not an advocate or a counsellor and should not be asked to provide advice, an opinion, explanation or any other assistance, beyond an interpretation of the conversation.

There are four main styles of interpreting.

Consecutive Interpreting – is the most common style of interpreting, where the speaker and the interpreter speak one after each other. The interpreter listens to a few sentences or messages, and then says them in the other language, while the speaker pauses. The speaker will then continue and the process repeats itself.

Simultaneous Interpreting – is commonly used in conference proceedings where the interpreter listens to the first words that the speaker says, then proceeds to interpret this immediately and continuously as they continue to talk, so that the speaker and the interpreter are speaking simultaneously.

Chucotage Interpreting (whispered interpreting) – is commonly used in court proceedings where the interpreter keeps the client informed of discussion taking place within the body of the court, such as legal deliberations between the parties, evidence of other witnesses etc.

Sight Translations - occurs when an interpreter is required to provide an oral and instantaneous interpretation of a written text, such as a court order or a form.

Why use an Interpreter?

Communication is a two way process. Many factors can hinder effective communication. The mere fact that a person can speak sufficient English to respond to basic questions or undertake daily tasks, does not mean that they will be able to effectively communicate in more stressful or unfamiliar environments.

Why use a Professional Interpreter?

Professional interpreters are bound by a strict code of ethics and have completed training and assessment to certify that they have a certain level of linguistic competence. Relying on clients' friends, children or other relatives to act as interpreters can have serious consequences such as:

- Breach of privacy and confidentiality.
- Lack of impartiality.
- Filtering of information to 'protect' their relative or friends.
- Using information for private advantage or gain.
- Inability to cope with subject matter or specialised terminology.

When to use an Interpreter?

You should use an Interpreter when your client:

- Asks for an interpreter
- Shows no understanding of English.
- Is able to communicate in English but in a limited capacity.
- Is able to communicate in English but is more comfortable with their own language.
- Is under stress which may affect their ability to communicate in English.

How to use the interpreter

Before the conversation:

- Find out information about the cultural background of the person you will be talking with e.g. information about their religion, food, ways of communicating, customs. You can find this information out by:
 - asking the person and/or members of their family,
 - doing some research on the internet (e.g. see www.fecca.org.au in resources - cultural directory or www.mdaa.org.au in Ethnic Communities and Disability),
 - contacting local resources like the Multicultural Resource Centres
 - looking at government websites.
 - asking the interpreter before the interview for information on any cultural factors that might affect the interview.
- Brief the interpreter about relevant words and concepts prior to the interview whenever possible.
- Arrange a place where the interview can be conducted in private.
- Allow for extra time.
- Arrange seating to facilitate communication between yourself and the parent/guardian. The ideal seating arrangement is a triangle, with participants at equal distances from each other, so that eye contact can be maintained at all times (if culturally appropriate)

During the conversation

- Introduce yourself and the interpreter.
- Ask advice about what to call people and how to address them.
- Explain both your and the interpreter's role.
- Stress that you and the interpreter are bound by codes of ethics to maintain the confidentiality of the interview.
- Structure the content of what you say to match the other person's competence in understanding English. This could include speaking slower and clearly using simple words.
- Avoid jargon, colloquialisms and slang.
- Use short sentences with correct English sentence structure.
- Use gestures and mime if required.
- Always use the first person e.g. How are you feeling? not (to the interpreter) Ask her how she is feeling?

- Don't let the interpreter's presence change your role in the interview. It is not the interpreter's role to conduct the interview.
- Speak slowly and clearly but naturally, if possible do not raise your voice.
- Use plain English where possible.
- If your service user does not understand what you are saying, it is your responsibility (not the interpreter's) to explain it more simply.
- Allow the interpreter to translate in regular and short intervals.
- When complex issues are involved remember to summarise periodically.
- Do not try to save time by asking the interpreter to summarise.
- Avoid long discussions with the interpreter. If you need to talk to the interpreter directly then the interpreter should explain to the patient about the nature of the conversation.
- Avoid leaving the interpreter alone with the client as this can place the interpreter in a compromising and awkward situation.
- Use translated materials and information when this is available.

After the interview

- Ask your client if everything was clearly understood. Find out if there are any questions or concerns.
- Thank both the parent and the interpreter. Say good-bye formally.
- After the client has left, debrief the interpreter, if necessary.

Be aware

- Speaking louder does not help.
- Do not use children as interpreters.
- You may need an interpreter who is of the same gender as your client.
- Your client may know the interpreter and be uncomfortable about this person interpreting for them. Ask your client if she/he knows the interpreter and seek permission for them to be involved in the conversation. If she/he refuses the interpreter, you will need to book another one.
- It may take more or fewer words than those you have spoken to convey the message in another language.
- People may not feel comfortable talking about particular topics or to people of a particular gender regarding certain topics.
- You are communicating with your client through your body language.
- Some behaviour may not be appropriate e.g. touching a person, having direct eye contact, close personal space.

References

Check your own state/territory language policy

WA Office of Multicultural Interests

http://www.omi.wa.gov.au/publications/Languages/language_services_2008.pdf

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Queensland Health, *Working with Interpreters in Health Settings*,

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The Victorian Foundation for Survivors of Torture, *School's in For Refugees: Whole-School Guide to Refugee Readiness*.

Victorian Transcultural Psychiatry Unit www.vtpu.org.au