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How to work with an interpreter
in the consulting room

A Guide for Healthcare Professionals



**your health
is your future**



What is a professional interpreter?

An interpreter is a person who is perfectly fluent both in your language and the language your patient speaks, and who is able to reproduce the information you provide to your patient without adding or leaving anything out. An interpreter is not only a person that speaks different languages; they have also studied memorisation techniques, note-taking techniques and reformulation, in order to give the patient the same message you have sent, with the same nuances and the same communicative intention. They are specialised or have experience in using healthcare or medical language.

INFORMATION AND CONFIDENTIALITY

Act 41/2002, of the 14th November, regulating the patient's autonomy and their rights and responsibilities regarding clinical information and documentation. It establishes the patient's right to confidentiality (that can only be guaranteed by a professional interpreter) and to receive information regarding their diagnosis and treatment in such terms that they may understand it and that is adapted to their needs.

How to work with an interpreter in the consulting room?



ALWAYS ADDRESS THE PATIENT

Always address the patient. Do not tell the interpreter to "Ask the patient how they are". Look the patient in the eye and ask "How are you?", thus establishing an atmosphere of trust. The interpreter will answer as if they were the patient: "I am well", "I have a headache", etc. and vice versa, as if they were you when talking to the patient, so that communication is more direct.

THE INTERPRETER WILL TRANSLATE EVERYTHING YOU SAY

Don't say anything you don't want the interpreter to translate. Don't make any comments that you wouldn't make in front of a Spanish-speaking patient. The interpreter has the obligation to translate everything that is said during the consultation.

USE SIMPLE LANGUAGE

Use simple language throughout the consultation (be aware that some patients have not had access to education) and explain to the interpreter any difficult medical terms as well as the case at hand. The more details the interpreter knows beforehand, the better they will be able to familiarise themselves with the topic and the better they will carry out their work.

ASK QUESTIONS AT THE END OF THE CONSULTATION

When the consultation is over, use the opportunity to ask the interpreter questions regarding aspects of the patient's culture that might interest or worry you. An interpreter is an expert in both cultures, and they will be delighted to see you are interested in any cultural aspects and explain to you whatever you need.

What alternatives are there if in-person interpreting is not available?

The Community of Madrid offers a professional interpreting service via telephone for healthcare centres. It is available 24 hours a day and you may request it through the Patient Services team.

Possible risks when working with a non-professional interpreter

They might simplify what the patient says or what you say too much because they do not consider it relevant. A professional interpreter translates all that is said so that both parties know what is being talked about at all times.

They might not have sufficient knowledge of the provider's language and transmit erroneous information to the patient. As a consequence, the patient might follow the treatment incorrectly or have an erroneous perception of their health status.

They might not translate any topics they might consider moral taboos (questions about sexual relations, news related to death, etc.). An interpreter is an expert in both cultures and knows when to warn the doctor about a delicate topic as well as explaining behaviours in the culture of the patient in order to bring the doctor closer to the patient's reality.

The patient might omit embarrassing information if the interpreter is a close relation (a partner or a member of the family when talking about sexually transmitted diseases, mother and children regarding menstruation, contraceptives, etc.).