



pacificinterpreters™  
We understand.

## Language Barriers in Health Care

By Jorge U. Ungo, Pacific Interpreters

Most Texans can “get by” with a little Spanish here or there. It might be something we picked up in our required high school foreign language classes or from a Spanish-speaking friend. It’s probably enough to get someone by in casual conversation, such as during a vacation in Cancun, but have you ever stopped to think about what would happen if you required medical attention on such a trip? Perhaps for someone who works in healthcare, this may not seem as daunting; you’re used to the environment and you’ve seen the tools. Imagine if both the language and the setting were foreign to you.

Every day, thousands of Americans whose primary language is not English find themselves unable to fully understand and communicate with their healthcare providers. It’s not from a lack of education or unwillingness to learn English—as we all know, the language of healthcare has a dictionary of its own, and further, English is not the easiest language to learn and understand. Individuals who speak English “well enough” often find themselves in over their heads when discussing important health information about themselves or their children.

Healthcare organizations should provide the means for their staff to be able to communicate effectively with everyone – including those whose primary language is not English. Why?

- **Cost Savings** – Yes, it may cost a few dollars to get an interpreter on the phone for language assistance, but by simply reducing the possibility of medical errors, your institution can save money.
- **Better Health Outcomes** – Studies have found that the use of interpreters reduces adverse events in hospitals <sup>1</sup>and when services are provided with an interpreter, patients are more likely to use primary care.<sup>2</sup>
- **Higher Patient Satisfaction** – By enhancing patient-provider communication and making patients feel more “at home” with your staff, patient satisfaction scores will rise.<sup>3</sup>
- **Legal Compliance** – In addition to Federal requirements for recipients of Medicare/Medicaid, the Joint Commission’s standards support the use of trained, qualified interpreters to provide language assistance.<sup>4</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> Divi, C., Koss, R.G., Schmaltz, M.S. Loeb, J.M. (2007) Patients with Limited English Experience More Serious Errors. *International Journal for Quality in Health Care*, 19(2):60–67

<sup>2</sup> Graham, E.A., Jacobs, T.A., Kwan-Gett, T.S., Cover, J. (2008). Health services utilization by low-income limited English proficient adults. *Journal of Immigrant Health*, 10(3):207-17.

<sup>3</sup> Ramirez D., Engel K.G., Tang T.S (2008). Language interpreter utilization in the emergency department setting: a clinical review. *Journal of Health Care for the Poor & Underserved*. 19(2):352-62.

<sup>4</sup> Advancing Effective Communication, Cultural Competence, and Patient- and Family-Centered Care: A Roadmap for Hospitals <http://www.jointcommission.org/assets/1/6/ARoadmapforHospitalsfinalversion727.pdf>



**pacificinterpreters™**

*We understand.*

So, what if you already have staff at your hospital who speak a second language? In upcoming articles, we'll take a more in-depth look at the new Joint Commission standards and the use of bilingual staff for language assistance.

For more information, contact Pacific Interpreters at [info@pacificinterpreters.com](mailto:info@pacificinterpreters.com) or 800.324.8060.