



## **The Language Services Debate: Patient safety vs. Financial Burden**

*Rashelle LeCaptain*

Patient safety is the center of the debate for the use of language services in the health care interpreting industry. Physicians that evade the use of language services, thereby barely meeting the needs of their limited English speaking patient population, raises ethical and legal issues that must be addressed. In the health care environment the debate surrounds the financial burden of non-value added interpreter services. Unqualified and untrained interpreters produce cumbersome and inefficient encounters for clinicians and their limited English speaking patients. These interpreters may be as detrimental as not using an interpreter to patient safety. The frustration felt by both sides of the argument will remain so long as unqualified interpreters continue to practice and health care providers continue to refuse to utilize the language services available.

### Value-Added Interpreters

A qualified interpreter has successfully completed various training programs. Most revolve around nationally accepted health care interpreter codes of ethics and standards of practice. Vocabulary must also be considered as a main component of interpreter training. Effective interpreters have the opportunity to mentor with seasoned interpreters with significant experience in the health care setting. The combinations of the above factors, in conjunction with various resources, are the foundation for successful interpreting in the health care setting.

Language screening is often minimal or bypassed by most employers of interpreters. Employers are eager to fill the language services request. The health care industry is eager to prove compliance with federal and regulatory mandates. Individuals that are assumed bilingual by themselves, employers or the health care industry are often placed into the role of health care interpreter to save time and cost. Effective communication starts with a fundamental level of fluency. Without this any and all interpreter training will be fruitless and reduce the return on investment for health care organizations and interpreter services providers.

Limited access to effective training opportunities is the biggest challenge health care interpreters and dual role bilingual health care providers face. Without appropriate training a bilingual individual will be delayed in gaining the skills necessary to become a qualified, value-added interpreter. Interpreter training programs should include an introduction to theory and mentorship that provides oversight of practicum. As a professional service, health care interpreters need to have access to continuing education opportunities that stretch their current knowledge to develop new skills.



Limited professional interpreter training affects the health care industry equally. The training void limits the access health care organizations have to qualified interpreters, perpetuating frustration and a decreased value on language services. So long as this is the case, the divide between interpreter supporters and health care organizations will continue to exist.

Using qualified interpreters increases provider productivity and decreases costs related to miscommunication. Teach back methods and the Ask Me 3 program are national efforts that focus on patient safety via effective communication. Providers that cannot clearly understand their patient's needs are likely to order additional tests to clearly identify what may be causing the patient's problem. Testing may even be ordered based on ineffective understanding of the patient's concerns that can later lead to even more testing. Patients are less likely to adhere to treatment regimes prescribed by their provider and will require more clinical visits and possible hospital stays.

### Patient and Provider Satisfaction Strategy

Health care organizations invest millions of dollars on strategic efforts to increase patient satisfaction with their organization. The newest technology is purchased, interior design is contracted for a soothing ambiance, and even the food served in cafeterias is scrutinized for patient and provider satisfaction. There is customer service training and organizational policy that assure a positive patient experience during their stay with the health care organization. All of these features are costly and are implemented as a part of the organization's marketing and strategic planning.

Provider satisfaction is based on their perception of being able to perform their jobs to the best of their ability. For that they are given resources that support this objective. All of these resources integrate into the strategy for effective practice and treatment of the patients. Again, financial resources are allocated to assure provider and patient satisfaction.

These strategic efforts require a lot of planning and work from health care administrators. They are required from planning to implementation to management. Strategic planning and management minimizes the need for administrative involvement and allows administrators to focus on other functions of their role while knowing that certain policies and processes are reaching their objectives.

### Language Access Planning

Most health care organizations have some form of language access plan. Still, many organizations are frustrated with language services because there is no real return on investment.

Organizations view interpreter and translating services as an expense because the perception is that there is no value added to the organization for these services. Language access plans that integrate qualified professional interpreters into organizational strategy and processes become an investment rather than an expense.

Language access plans require fiscal resources from health care organizations. A successful plan requires the involvement of administrators to develop a language access plan that supports their organization's strategic objectives. This plan will meet service expectations and create access to professional health care interpreters on demand. Interpreters and translations will become useful resources for both the organization and its staff, turning a burdensome expense into a value added investment.

### Conclusion

Patient safety is the principle concern for everyone involved in health care. Health care organizations that provide qualified health care interpreters and written translations to their clinicians will improve patient safety and satisfaction. Health care interpreters that seek out and complete trainings that develop their professional skills will be qualified to be a professional resource used in patient care. When these two initiatives are complete, both patient safety and value added investments are accomplished creating a cohesion between the interpreting and health care industries that provides limited English speaking patients equal access to health care.