

## Why is working with a qualified medical interpreter important?

English language barriers not only create miscommunication, they can also put patients at a higher risk for medical errors. Therefore, it is important to work with qualified medical interpreters in your institution. Engaging family members as interpreters is not good practice and could even be against the law. Likewise, patients should not bring their own interpreters.

## Guidelines for working effectively with qualified medical interpreters

### Before the encounter

**Provide the qualified medical interpreter with background information.** They will explain the mechanics of the interpretation, including that everything spoken aloud will be interpreted, and they will manage the flow of information if you are moving too quickly.

### During the encounter

**Speak at a comfortable pace and pause frequently to allow for interpretation.** Ask one question at a time, and avoid thinking out loud (remember that everything will be interpreted). Pause after expressing a few complete ideas (do not stop mid-sentence) to allow for complete interpretation.

**Address the patient and maintain primary eye contact with your patient.** The role of the qualified medical interpreter is essential, but is secondary to your relationship with the patient. Be aware of nonverbal communication. Avoid hand gestures not universally understood.

**Don't ask for word-for-word interpreting.** Qualified medical interpreters relay meaning, and word-for-word interpretation will often lose meaning. Avoid medical jargon, idioms, acronyms, and very culturally-bound expressions, as these can hinder understanding and might not translate well or at all into other languages.

**Expect qualified medical interpreters to abide by their professional Code of Ethics.**

A qualified medical interpreter will adhere to the ethical principles of confidentiality, accuracy, and impartiality, among others.

### After the encounter

**Debrief with the qualified medical interpreter and ask for clarification in case of miscommunications based on language or culture.** Document everything.