

## **Your Patient Right: Right to an Interpreter**

One of the lesser known rights patients are now enjoying since the implementation of the ACA ("Obamacare") is the right to an interpreter. This is your right in a doctor's office, when in communication with your insurance, or when receiving medical services of any kind.

Yet, patients confronted with the need for translation often find that this right is not fully enforced in many instances. Whether a foreign visitor, elderly parent or new immigrant without command of the English language, here are a few tips to getting the help you need.

### 1. Contact your insurance

When signing up for insurance, it is now customary that customers be asked and assigned a preferred language. Insurance companies are mandated to provide their subscribers with written and verbal translation services whenever appropriate or requested. While representatives fluent in Spanish might be more readily available than one speaking Hmong or German, every effort must be made to allow and encourage a proper and effective dialogue.

Travel and foreign emergency insurances automatically provide translation support for their subscribers.

When looking for a new doctor, call your insurer first. You can be referred to a provider both able to converse with you, and within your plan network, saving you \$ in the process. Offices share their language capacity with insurers.

### 2. Contact the staff

It is advisable to call the office before an appointment, and ask for an interpreter. This is probably where you will meet the most hurdles, as most offices do not have access to translators unless one of their staff member speaks your language. In such cases, advance notice will help lower the impact of this employee leaving her duties to assist you.

Most practices will ask you to come with your own translator. Due to HIPAA regulations, and the need to protect your medical history and records, as well as cost, hiring an outside interpreter is unlikely on the office part. Hospitals are better able to provide such a service through a much larger staff pool.

### 3. Ask a friend or relative

Rather than wasting time and effort communicating with your doctor via sign language, consider bringing a friend or relative with you, especially in serious or complicated cases. For routine exams or basic visits (to a lab, for Xray), calling someone on the phone who can translate might be enough.

### 4. Contact your State

In CA, the Office of the Patient Advocate offers a variety of tools, resources, brochures and information on the healthcare system in several languages. English, Spanish, Korean, Vietnamese, Russian, Farsi and Hmong are some of the options. Information may be downloaded directly, or requested by mail. This agency also offers assistance with filing complaints or reporting violations. Call them at 888-466-8900 or visit <http://www.opa.ca.gov>

Other states should offer similar services. Contact the insurance Commissioner's office for information.

Giving up this right because of poor planning or unforeseen circumstances should not deter you from seeking medical care. In case of a true emergency, your local embassy or consulate may be able to help out, or refer you to a trustworthy translator for hire.

Patient advocates may also be able to assist you. Many such as myself, are fluent in other languages, and are familiar enough with the system to provide you with this service, and with ethical and trustworthy privacy.

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