



Multilingualism in the Health and Social Care Sector

Communication in hospitals, doctors' offices, homes for the elderly or other health institutions can become problematic if not conducted effectively. In some cases, it may even be a matter of life and death if a doctor does not correctly understand a patient's symptoms, or if a patient is unclear about the treatment procedure. Although it might be thought that the health and social care sectors deal with problems quite different from language, a lot of the issues that occur actually relate to effective communication. Issues relating to health and well-being are in themselves sensitive matters and it becomes even more upsetting when a patient is not able to communicate his or her problems adequately.

Challenges

In large European urban areas, many health institutions have a growing number of staff who speak a range of languages. However, in most cases there is no consistent method of using this resource strategically, for example by collecting data on the available languages and using them to improve communication with patients.

Staff with other languages can facilitate everyday communication in the hospital. However, when serious health issues are concerned and communication problems are likely to occur, a professional interpreter should be involved. In some countries a right to an interpreter might even exist. Here, too, there is a problem of regulation and consistency. Patients are not always aware of this opportunity and health providers might have difficulties in finding an available interpreter when needed in a given situation. Cities need to provide a flexible and effective way of organising interpreting services for health matters and making appropriate information available to those who need it. In addition, general information about the health system or information on specific conditions and treatments should be translated into other languages and made available to health care providers. This would improve both the effectiveness and the range of health and social care services.

Advantages

Even small things can make a difference: greetings or phrases in other languages, when used by a receptionist or posted on the walls of a doctor's office, can make speakers of those languages feel more at ease.

Cultural issues are also as important as language. Pain might be expressed in different ways; some topics might be taboo or there might be high sensitivity concerning gender issues. This will be known to care workers or specialist interpreters from different cultural backgrounds who can act as cultural and linguistic mediators to improve the treatment process. In any case, such issues are more easily identified by health workers who can communicate in the patient's language. This shows the enormous potential of multilingualism in the everyday communication of hospitals or GPs' offices as well as in homes for the elderly.

Broken links, corrections and updates can be reported and viewed at www.urbanlanguages.eu/toolkits/errata

Ideas for public or private employers, management and administration in the health and social care sector



Have you thought about finding out and keeping a record of all languages spoken by the staff at your institution?



You can do this with a simple questionnaire asking about the language skills of your staff. Answers can be fed into a database, which can be quickly accessed by other staff members when needed. Let staff know that their language skills are valuable for the institution.



You can use [this questionnaire from Hamburg¹](#) to assess the language skills of your employees.



Have you thought about using staff who speak other languages as mediators?



By keeping track of all languages spoken by your employees, you can more easily identify and recruit the languages that are needed but lacking at your institution.



“Health tourism” has risen over the years and brings wealthy patients to hospitals in other countries. This constitutes an additional source of income for health institutions. Members of staff who speak these languages are able to communicate effectively with those patients.



Judging from recent world events and migration patterns, you might try to anticipate which interpreters and mediators will be needed in the future.

- Multilingual staff can effectively improve communication in the everyday life of the health institution. However, when serious health matters are concerned, communication should occur in the language that the patient understands and a professional interpreter should be involved. A professional interpreter from the same cultural (not just language) background will also understand cultural peculiarities in health matters.



*Is the opportunity to avail of an interpreter clear to all patients and staff?
Is there easy access to an interpreter at your institution?*



A multilingual information poster can be hung up in the entrance area to make this clear to patients. This should also contain information on where and how a translator can be obtained.

¹ <http://www.kombi-hamburg.de/kombi.html?seite=17&lang=en>



In some counties, there might be a “right to an interpreter”. Find out whether this right exists in your country and make its legal basis known to staff and patients.



There are agencies in London that offer cost-effective telephone interpreting. Interpreters are simply called on a designated number at prearranged times.



In Toronto, Language Services Toronto, a programme led by the Toronto Local Health Integration Network, provides real-time phone interpreting 24 hours a day, seven days a week, in 170 languages, including Aboriginal languages. The 2012 news release announcing this service is available in English, French, Chinese, Punjabi and Portuguese.



The Central London Community Healthcare Trust provides healthcare in the boroughs of Barnet, Hammersmith & Fulham, Kensington & Chelsea, and Westminster. It runs an in-house interpreting service designed “to ensure that patients whose preferred language is [a language] other than English have equal access to health and non-health services.” According to their website they deliver “face to face interpreting in more than 100 languages and dialects.”



Have you thought about creating a central repository of information on the health system, specific health issues or on specific documents in other languages that would be readily available to all providers?



You can collect multilingual material by sending out a questionnaire asking staff to list the translated material they use. This data can be fed into a public website or an internal database where it can be quickly accessed by other staff when needed.



There are psychologists who are specialised in migration-related problems, sometimes even for particular ethnic groups. Collect this information and make it available to patients.



Have you thought about improving services for patients with a different language/cultural background?



Receptionists, for example, can be trained to greet patients and use simple phrases in other languages. This can help speakers of other languages to feel more comfortable. A small list with those phrases can be drawn up.



Offer language courses to your employees in the most encountered foreign languages at your institution.



A welcome slogan in different languages can be hung in the entrance area.



Below is an example of a welcome sign from the reception of the San Gallicano Hospital in Rome, which is run by the National Institute for Health, Migration and Poverty



EURAXESS² is the European platform for open positions and job market requirements and conditions in European countries



In Barts Health Trust area (London) patients are asked whether they want to receive information in Bengali or English on the hospital telephone line. This measure acknowledges that a high proportion of local residents are Bengali speakers.



In Strasbourg, a flyer with important instructions on the necessary documents and identification papers for consultation is posted in eight different languages at hospital receptionists' offices and in public information windows.



In Utrecht, the municipal health service (GG & GD Utrecht) employs workers who are trained in providing information in the languages of those who are new to the Netherlands and unfamiliar with the Dutch health care system.



In Rome, the National Institute for Health, Migration and Poverty trains and employs transcultural mediation staff from different areas of the world and who speak a variety of languages. They provide migrants with health care guidance and are involved throughout the health care process. Written information is translated into the most frequently encountered languages. Multilingual versions of all main documents are provided: brochures, notices, directions, informed consent, questionnaires for assessing patients' needs and satisfaction, news on website.



The Association of Doctors of Foreign Origin (AMSI) in Rome runs a multicultural/multilingual clinic for foreigners.



In Hamburg, the nursing service “Multi-Kulti Pflegedienst” targets the needs of the multicultural population of the district of Wilhelmsburg. They provide nursing services for the elderly in several languages and claim that “we speak the language of our patients and understand their culture so that we can provide a targeted treatment for everyone”.



Have you considered providing screening programmes in other languages?



In Utrecht, every woman of a certain age receives a letter calling them for a breast check. This letter is provided in Dutch, Turkish and Arabic.



In Montreal, posters address women in Arabic about breast screenings:





Did you know that patients with Alzheimer's disease sometimes go back to speaking a language from earlier in their lives?



This has been shown in scientific studies and is another argument for the need for multilingual staff.



Do you provide enough opportunities for your international staff to learn or improve in the host language?



Employees from other countries often fill labour gaps in the health sector. Make sure that they have the opportunity to learn the host language and job-specific vocabulary, e.g. by language courses especially targeted for the health sector.



One example of good practice is Deutsch für Ärzte/German for Doctors, which organises several courses. See: http://www.imed-komm.eu/kurs_aerzte or <http://www.goethe.de/ins/de/spr/ber/dfa/enindex.htm>



Do you value the different language skills of your plurilingual staff?



Emphasise language diversity as a strength of your health care institution and use it strategically. Small signs can make a difference and might increase the motivation of your staff.

Ideas for plurilingual patients



Are you aware that professional interpreters can help you communicate with doctors and medical staff?



In health matters it is really important to clearly express your symptoms to the doctor and to understand the diagnoses and treatment. Many health institutions can provide an interpreter who will assist you to communicate with the doctor and medical staff in the clearest way. Using an interpreter means that you don't have to bother family members with this. Find out about or ask your doctor about this opportunity.



Did you know that there are psychologists who specialise in migration-related issues?



The processes of migration and integration can be associated with mental health issues. There are specialised psychologists who provide help in this area, sometimes even for particular cultural groups. Find out about those psychologists and see what support you can avail of.

Ideas for employees in the health sector



Have you thought about certifying your language skills?



Making your language skills visible creates new opportunities at work. You might think about getting certificates and including them in your CV.



Have you thought how you might develop your language competences?



This can range from learning simple phrases and greetings in migrant languages to learning the specific vocabulary of the health sector in the languages of patients from other countries.



Did you know that your language skills are a valuable resource for a health institution, especially in caring for the elderly?



As our society ages, first generation migrants are increasingly entering homes for the elderly.

This is even more relevant for migrant patients suffering from Alzheimer's disease. Studies have shown that they may go back to their mother tongue.



Are you sensitive towards patients with language difficulties?



Be aware that migrants and foreign patients may not be able to express their sickness adequately. Being sick and not being able to talk about this in your mother tongue can be a stressful situation. Be patient!

Ideas for public health authorities



Have you established guidelines for health and social care institutions in response to increasing language diversification among patients and service users?



In Dublin, the publicly funded Health Service Executive (HSE) has produced Good Practice Guidelines for HSE Staff in the Provision of Interpreting Services. These guidelines provide advice for staff in accessing and working with trained interpreters, including sign language interpreters. Within these guidelines, staff are advised to seek a trained interpreter when a patient does not speak English “very well”. Staff are also advised to let patients know that they have a right to an interpreter. The guidelines also list the various arrangements throughout the HSE regarding sourcing and booking interpreters”. The report also advises against the use of family, friends or other HSE staff members for interpreting services.



In London, Public Health England Executive Agency has established a [migrant health guide](#)³ with key recommendations for health practitioners who care for migrants.



Have you translated general information on the health system into the most commonly encountered foreign languages?



Information can be provided online or in brochures. Topics could include the general health system, a guide for pregnant women, family services, information on pre-emptive check-ups.



Another suggestion would be to translate material into easy-to-read versions of the host language so that service users with limited proficiency can understand the information.



In Dublin, the Health Service Executive established a website titled “Informing Families” in French, Lithuanian, Polish, Brazilian Portuguese, Romanian and Russian.



In Rome, the Local Health Agency ‘Roma B’ has prepared a Foreigners’ Guide to Health Care Services about norms and procedures on how to register to the National Health System and how to make use of health care services in the Lazio region and in Rome. The document includes names, addresses and contact details of the health agency and hospitals, and is available in 5 languages: Chinese, English, Spanish, French, Romanian.

3 <http://webarchive.nationalarchives.gov.uk/20140714084352/http://www.hpa.org.uk/MigrantHealthGuide>



In Vancouver, to prevent the spread of the flu, the local public health provider issued posters urging people to wash their hands in various languages including English, French, Chinese, Japanese, Korean, Punjabi, Arabic and Spanish.



Have you considered that screening programmes can be publicised in other languages?



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Do you systematically collect and publicise a list of multilingual practitioners, psychologists specialised in migration related problems, interpreting services or migrant organisations that assist in health matters in your region?



For tourists and migrants, the option of treatment in their own language is highly important. If this information was made available centrally, more people would get better treatment. The list could be drawn up according to the practitioners' areas of specialisation.



The Affiliation of Multicultural Societies and Service Agencies produced a comprehensive guide to multicultural health programmes and resources in Vancouver. For each organisation, the languages in which the information and services are available are listed.



There are psychologists who specialise in migration-related problems, sometimes even for particular ethnic groups. Collect this information and make it centrally available to patients and health institutions.

Conclusion

Within the health sector, multilingualism can play a vital role in improving communication, by making people feel at ease, by helping to achieve fast and accurate diagnoses, by avoiding errors and by increasing well-being in general.

One of the first steps could be to find out how interpretation services can effectively be assessed and make this information clear and available to patients and employees.

Whatever you do, we wish you every success in increasing your multilingual capabilities, and please do get in touch with us to share your experiences and tips in using more than one language in the public health system!

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