

The LANGUAGE RX

Health care for many immigrants would be lost in translation if not for the emerging presence of medical interpreters.

By Toni De Aztlan
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When Dr. Erwin M. Vasquez walks through the waiting room of the Clinica Luz del Mundo in Oakland Park, his patients greet him with an "hola, doctor" or a "hello doctor." He responds warmly, in both languages. And that's not a coincidence. Vasquez, the clinic's director, knows the value of speaking the primary language of his patients -- and has seen what can go wrong when language barriers get in the way of good medicine.

A few weeks ago, a Spanish-speaking Venezuelan patient came to see Vasquez after being treated at a local hospital emergency room for a high fever. The man, who does not speak English, told Vasquez the ER doctor who treated him did not speak Spanish.

The ER doctor treated him for what he thought was a urine infection. After three days, his condition worsened, and the man's family asked Vasquez to intervene.

"It was dengue fever," said Vasquez. "They didn't know to ask if he had a mosquito bite or about an epidemic in the country."

Vasquez ultimately treated the man, who needed a blood transfusion. And while his condition cleared in a few days, Vasquez said the case is a lasting reminder of the cultural barriers non-English-speaking patients encounter routinely in South Florida's health-care system.

His small, volunteer-run clinic has 12,000 patient visits a year -- the majority of his patients speak Spanish and little or no English.

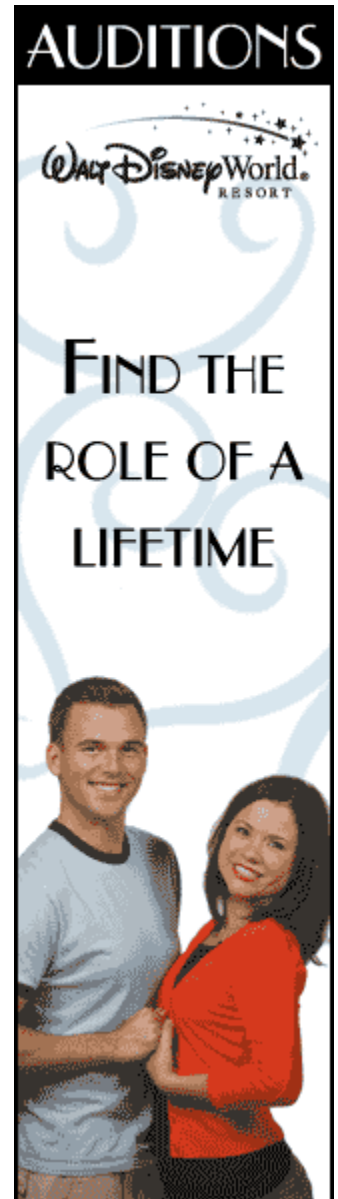
When it comes to the health care, said Vasquez, "If you can't communicate, there is no access."

Access to health care for patients who can't speak English is a growing concern. The Joint Commission on Accreditation of Healthcare Organizations, an independent nonprofit organization that accredits many South Florida hospitals, recently finished a 30-month study to assess hospitals' ability to address issues of language and culture in patient care.

The study surveyed 60 hospitals across the country, including at least one in South Florida, to determine the challenge of treating non-English-speaking patients. Findings are expected later this year.

"Communication is a key component of patient safety. If there is a communication problem, that could pose significant safety concerns," said Amy Wilson-Stonks, associate project director for the commission and principal investigator for the study.

According to U.S. Census data, 47 million people in the United States speak a language other than English. In Broward County, it's 28.8 percent of residents. In Palm Beach County it's 21.7 percent. In Miami-Dade County, the number jumps to 67.9 percent. And experts say those numbers will continue to grow.



Language barriers contribute to fear and distrust of health-care professionals by non-English-speaking patients, experts say. As a result, many hesitate to seek care until it becomes an emergency, adding to the overcrowding of emergency departments.

Language barriers make it difficult for patients to communicate with doctors and nurses, and may be hurdles to insurance or government assistance programs.

Dominique Erie, an interpreter for nurses in Palm Beach County's Healthy Start program, said many Haitian families have problems applying for and receiving Medicaid. Erie, a Royal Palm Beach resident, said many also complain that they often sit in waiting rooms for hours without being able to ask office workers to explain why.

Cultural differences can also make a doctor's visit uncomfortable. A nurse who grabs a patient's arm to draw blood, without being able to explain what she is doing, may be perceived as administering poor treatment.

"They don't get the care from a nurse that doesn't speak Spanish the same way if they spoke English," said Paloma Prata, 30, a hospital liaison for the Palm Beach County Health Department. Prata said patients whose caregivers do not speak their language will sometimes ask other patients, who speak the same language, questions about their care -- and get the wrong information.

As the number of non-English-speaking Americans continues to rise across the country, the need for medical interpreters is growing, said Mara Youdelman, an attorney with National Health Law -- a watchdog group that has been monitoring language barriers in health care.

Fourteen states experienced a 100 percent or more growth of non-English-speaking residents in the past decade. Florida had a 61 percent growth.

To address the needs of such patients, some health-care providers have medical interpreters on staff. In Palm Beach County, bilingual medical staff are being trained through a Washington-based program. The year-old initiative has trained 62 people to work as professional interpreters throughout county health programs.

The North Broward Hospital District also has created bilingual training programs to serve public hospitals and clinics in the county.

And Jackson Memorial Hospital in Miami has an interpreter services department with 11 full-time employees.

"Your best bet is to have a work force that mirrors your community," said Millie Velez, director of multicultural affairs for the North Broward Hospital District. She said the district is looking to expand their current interpreter-training program.

Medical interpreters fulfill the role of communicator, patient advocate and cultural broker, said Sonia Martinez, manager for interpretive services at Jackson Memorial.

Interpreters must know medical terms and have familiarity with the cultures of the people they are serving, Martinez said. She added that religious beliefs and knowledge of traditional herbal treatments and alternative medicine practices are also important.

Under federal mandate, health-care providers must furnish interpretation services for patients who can't speak English at no cost. Medicaid can reimburse for the cost of interpretation services. Thirteen states have approved Medicaid reimbursement to providers; Florida is not one of them. According to a 2002 report from the Office of Management and Budget, the cost of providing an interpreter is estimated to be \$4.04 more per visit.

There is no standard certification for medical interpreters, according to Martha Galindo, vice president of the Florida Chapter of the American Translators Association. This makes it hard to count the number of interpreters in the field. The association has 300 members. Galindo said that although there is a certification for courtroom translators there isn't a similar standard for medical interpreters.

"There should be specialized training for that," she said.

In Palm Beach County, the Language Access program is one fledgling organization working to teach language skills to health-care professionals. It is an intensive training that includes lessons in medical terminology, basic anatomy and cultural awareness.

"Providers should be paying people to do this but they don't. They have been getting away with using bilingual staff, sometimes a custodian or a family member," said Corinne Danielson, the director of the Glades Initiative Language Access program, "We're trying to help them build a system that is cost effective and better quality."

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