

The Columbus Dispatch

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REPORTS ON U.S. CARE

Language is big concern at hospitals

Columbus facilities working to improve interpreter services

Thursday, October 12, 2006

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THE COLUMBUS DISPATCH

Pulmonary embolism.

Contusion.

Subcutaneous.

Myocardial infarction.

If doctor talk is gibberish to English speakers, imagine the challenges for those who struggle with the language or don't speak it at all.

Both in communities that have always been rich in diversity and in those where the face of a minority was once a surprise, the number of people who speak little or no English is growing.

Reports released yesterday by the National Health Law Program in Washington, D.C., highlight the need for good hospital interpreters, in dozens of languages. Filling the need can be a struggle, particularly because Medicare and private insurers don't pay for those services.

Almost 52 million people — close to 19 percent of the U.S. population — speak a language other than English at home.

In Columbus, 76,843 of the 633,243 people who are age 5 or older speak another language at home, according to the U.S. Census.

That translates to 63 percent of U.S. hospitals treating patients with limited English skills either daily or weekly, according to a report from the National Health Law Program and the Health Research and Educational Trust, an affiliate of the American Hospital Association.

Of those hospitals, 3 percent reported that they were reimbursed for language services, says the report, which includes information collected from 861 hospitals.

"I can't imagine how scary it would be to walk into a hospital in, say, France or Germany when I didn't speak the language," said Richard Potts, director of customer service at Ohio State University Medical Center.

"I feel a real need and importance to have the right resources available. ... A hospital experience is scary enough."

The biggest barrier to providing an interpreter was the inability to identify people who

would need one before their arrival at the hospital, according to the report.

"Some hospitals indicated that staff feel uncomfortable about asking patients their primary language," said Romana Hasnain-Wynia, vice president of research for the Health Research and Educational Trust.

Languages other than English that were encountered most frequently in the hospitals were Spanish, Chinese and Vietnamese.

In Columbus, Spanish and Somali are most common, said Erika Shell Castro, manager of interpretive services for OhioHealth.

In her department, more than 20 on-staff interpreters help immigrants navigate the health-care system. Other interpreters are called in as needed. Last year, patients needed interpreters for 60 languages.

In a month, interpreters attend about 2,000 appointments at Grady Memorial, Grant and Riverside Methodist hospitals and various other OhioHealth sites, Castro said.

In her five years at Ohio -Health, Castro has worked to improve the quality of interpreters through a 40-hour training program, she said.

The hospital system spends about \$1 million a year on interpretive services, she said.

At OSU Medical Center, the cost is similar and interpreters are needed for about 1,300 appointments a month, Potts said.

The hospital uses a handful of part-time staff interpreters and outside agencies. In some cases, interpreters for rarely encountered languages are hard to come by, he said.

For several years, Columbus hospitals have shared ideas and jointly developed a Web site where common medical documents can be downloaded in various languages.

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