Translators needed in UK GP surgeries say researchers

Posted on Monday 5th September 2011

Professional interpreters are under-used in the NHS according to new research from the University of Birmingham. The researchers identify language barriers as an increasing obstacle to the provision of healthcare in a paper published in the journal *PLoS ONE*.

Effective communication is instrumental in the delivery of healthcare support and a cross-sectional study of 41 general practices in the UK highlights language disparities between patients and healthcare professionals. This is seen as restrictive to the delivery of successful treatment and medical advice which can impact a patient's understanding of their condition and treatment.

The study identifies clear potential for miscommunication in very sensitive and often confusing circumstances and calls for healthcare professionals to follow the American model of deploying professional interpreters more frequently to eliminate language barriers. Current NHS policy acknowledges the linguistic needs of patients and their families by offering interpreting services to all health professionals in a wide range of languages, but this research suggests these resources are being under-used.

Lead author, Dr Paramjit Gill, a reader in Primary Care Research at the University of Birmingham's School of Health and Population Sciences, explains:

"There is a need for greater provision of interpreters in the UK as clinicians are ultimately responsible for ensuring effective communication with their patients and in improving patient care and safety.

"This study identifies the range of first languages spoken by patients as exceeding the number of languages spoken by healthcare professionals. Physicians seemingly rely on their own very basic knowledge of non-native languages to communicate, or call on friends or family members of patients to interpret during consultations, when they should be using professional translators to improve patient satisfaction and effective communication."

77 family medicine practitioners from the West Midlands took part in the study, with 1,008 patient consultations examined. Practitioners were found to demonstrate varying levels of proficiency of 23 languages other than English, whilst patients presented with 38 different first languages, highlighting the need for translators to be present in many consultations to avoid the potential for miscommunication.

Of the 1,008 consultations examined, more than 700 were carried out in English, 57 relied on a relative or friend to act as translator between the doctor and patient, and a mere six called on the services of a professional interpreter, five of which instances occurred in one practice.

This study was funded by the Heart of Birmingham Teaching Primary Care Trust and through the National Institute for Health Research R&D Support Funding. For more information, please contact Dr Paramjit Gill via 0121 414 3758 or **p.s.gill@bham.ac.uk (mailto:p.s.gill@bham.ac.uk)** .

Notes to Editors

For media enquiries, please contact Amy Cory, University of Birmingham Press Office via 0121 414 6029 or **a.cory@bham.ac.uk (mailto:a.cory@bham.ac.uk)** .

© University of Birmingham 2015

2014 Website of the Year