

Greater use of interpreting services required for medical patients

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Professional interpreters are under-used in the NHS, according to new research recently published in the journal **PLoS ONE** (<http://www.plosone.org/home.action>). The researchers identify language barriers as an increasing obstacle to the provision of healthcare.

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 upon 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.

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.

[See the full press release \(http://www.birmingham.ac.uk/news/latest/2011/09/05-Sept-Translators-needed-in-UK-GP-surgeries-say-researchers.aspx\)](http://www.birmingham.ac.uk/news/latest/2011/09/05-Sept-Translators-needed-in-UK-GP-surgeries-say-researchers.aspx)