Educational support materials for ABIM’s Care for the Underserved Module

Question 19

The growing number of patients with limited English proficiency creates many challenges for patients, physicians and health systems. Physicians should be aware that legal standards regarding interpreter use are in constant flux and that the use of untrained interpreters may jeopardize the effectiveness and safety of their clinical care and expose them to liability.1,2

When using office staff to interpret, physicians should ensure that they are trained to so, as many may lack appropriate language skills.3 Moreover, trained medical interpreters offer many benefits over untrained interpreters including confidentially, greater accuracy, and greater patient satisfaction and, often, improved outcomes.4,5

Use of untrained interpreters, including nursing staff, has been associated with significant communication errors.6,7 Observational studies indicate that untrained interpreters often add or substitute comments that may substantially alter the meaning of the communication between patient and physician.6-8 Because of this tendency, clear instructions to repeat everything said verbatim can enhance clarity and confidence in the interpretation. While trained medical interpreters can act as cultural brokers by signaling potential cultural misunderstanding to the physician, untrained interpreters should focus on communication clarity.2

Physicians should be aware that even the use of professional interpreters is associated with loss of patient centeredness in clinical encounters9,10 and should take pains to ensure that patients with limited English proficiency are encouraged to express their concerns. Physician training in use of interpreters is associated with less clinical difficulty and greater physician satisfaction in providing clinical care to patients with limited English proficiency.11

For further information, see the following:


This educational support material was created by the Society of General Internal Medicine’s Disparities Task Force. For more information, visit www.sgim.org/go/disparities
Educational support materials for ABIM’s Care for the Underserved Module


This educational support material was created by the Society of General Internal Medicine’s Disparities Task Force. For more information, visit www.sgim.org/go/disparities