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Briefing Sheet

Working with interpreters to support effective communication



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Introduction

This Briefing Paper has been produced by MECOPP to support health and social care practitioners develop their practice in working more effectively with interpreters. For those who wish to develop their knowledge and understanding in more depth, comprehensive guidance is available through the NHS Scotland Competency Framework for Interpreting¹ and the 'Now we're talking' Guidance². This paper can be used as an aid to, or synopsis of, these publications.

The focus of this paper is on face to face communication with individuals who have limited or no literacy in English and who, additionally, are not literate in their mother tongue and therefore unable to access written translated materials.

The inability to access either written or spoken information is often cited as a significant barrier to accessing services by individuals who have limited or no literacy in English. As a result of this, many individuals are reliant on good quality interpreting and translation services. For carers, being able to accurately convey both the complexity and demands of a caring situation can be a determining factor in whether an individual is eligible for support.

Within the context of health and social care and the increasing emphasis on 'conversational' approaches to assessment, 'dialogue' is a crucial factor within the assessment process.

This paper will therefore be of particular relevance to professionals supporting informal carers and those in receipt of care who require language support.

Background

Data taken from the 2011 Census records a total of 62,128 people across all age groups as 'not speaking English very well' and a further 11,412 as 'not speaking English at all'. The table below provides data on proficiency in English broken down by age (20+) and gender but not ethnicity.

¹ <http://www.healthscotland.com/uploads/documents/15817-NHS%20Scotland%20CFI-FINAL.DOC>

² <http://www.healthscotland.com/uploads/documents/7833-Nowwe'retalkinginterpretingguidelines.pdf>

Age Range	Does not speak English well			Does not speak English at all		
	Male	Female	Total	Male	Female	Total
20 to 24	2,374	2,320	4,694	328	301	629
25 to 29	2,810	2,878	5,688	324	365	689
30 to 34	2,917	2,526	5,443	358	366	724
35 to 39	2,633	2,214	4,847	387	371	758
40 to 44	2,388	2,062	4,450	374	362	736
45 to 49	2,266	1,965	4,231	385	376	761
50 to 54	2,046	1,908	3,954	335	420	755
55 to 59	1,461	1,446	2,907	245	310	555
60 to 64	1,147	1,054	2,201	193	294	487
65 to 69	858	758	1,616	134	213	347
70 to 74	826	919	1,745	128	274	402
75 to 79	743	910	1,653	108	253	361
80 to 84	528	781	1,309	72	190	262
85 +	372	1,003	1,375	52	129	181

General Points

Practitioners can do much to improve the quality of communication during the assessment process by adopting a ‘common sense’ approach. If an individual has a limited understanding of English and an interpreter is unavailable, the following points can assist in helping to ensure both parties communicate as effectively as possible:

- ▶ Allow more time for the meeting to take place and do not show that you are in a hurry;
- ▶ Adopt a sympathetic tone and use non-verbal signals such as a smile or a gesture, where appropriate, to convey that you are listening;
- ▶ Speak slowly and clearly and do not speak more loudly than the volume you would ordinarily use;
- ▶ Use shorter sentences but do not omit essential information;
- ▶ Avoid the use of slang, jargon, euphemisms or acronyms;
- ▶ Where possible and appropriate, demonstrate things or use pictures to try and elicit the information you need;

- ▶ Regularly check with the individual that they have understood what you are speaking about;
- ▶ Encourage the individual to ask questions if they are having difficulties in understanding you;
- ▶ Watch for non-verbal signals that may indicate that the individual is struggling with understanding what is being said;
- ▶ Break down complex information into smaller 'chunks' and ensure it is given in the right order; and,
- ▶ Look for signs of tiredness in the other person to gauge whether or not it is productive to continue.

Avoiding the use of Informal Interpreters

There may be occasions, even when an independent interpreter or bi-lingual advocate is clearly needed, that this may not be possible. In these situations, practitioners may be tempted to use family members or friends to assist. However, this can create more problems for the individuals involved. The use of informal interpreters, particularly children and young people, should be avoided whenever possible. This is because:

- ▶ The individual may be unfamiliar with the terms used or the concepts and procedures involved;
- ▶ Inaccurate or unreliable information may be given with no means to check the quality of information being passed on or received;
- ▶ Information may be distorted by their judgements or opinions because of personal interest in, or view of, the situation;
- ▶ Informal interpreters are not bound by any professional code of conduct or ethical considerations to safeguard confidentiality; and,
- ▶ Any potential breach of confidentiality may impact on their immediate or ongoing relationship with the individual involved.

The practitioner also needs to consider the perspective of the individual who requires language support:

- ▶ Intimate or personal details may be withheld if the person acting as an informal interpreter is a family member or friend, particularly if they are of the opposite sex or much younger;
- ▶ Information may not be disclosed because of ongoing concerns about confidentiality;
- ▶ The full extent of any difficulties they are having may not be given in order to protect family and friends from a distressing or sensitive situation; and,
- ▶ There may be fears that they are not being told everything by family or friends acting as informal interpreters in order to shield or protect them from potentially distressing information.

Practitioners should be aware that not using appropriate interpreting could be construed as discriminatory under equalities legislation.

There may be instances where, despite the offer of independent interpreting, individuals will still choose to use family members or friends. In these circumstances, there is little the practitioner can do but to inform the person of any potential difficulties that may arise from this approach and to document the individual's choice.

Fears around maintaining confidentiality may also influence an individual's decision to use formal interpreting services. In local authority areas where formal interpreting and translation agencies are available, there is a likelihood that the interpreter may be known either to the family or to the individual. In these circumstances, it can be helpful to reassure the individual that strict codes of conduct govern the behaviour of paid interpreters and that their confidentiality will be maintained. Alternatives to consider include telephone or remote interpreting services.

Working with Professional Interpreters

If language support is required, it is always preferable to use independent and trained interpreters. Local authorities and health boards will have different procedures in place to access professional interpreters which may include 'in-house' services, contracted agencies or third party interpreting support.

To ensure the best is achieved from the use of an interpreter, practitioners should:

- ▶ Acknowledge and respect the role of the interpreter as a professional communicator;
- ▶ Meet with the interpreter beforehand to discuss and agree how you will conduct the meeting, for example, giving small 'chunks' of information and then stopping to allow the interpreter to provide that information without being overloaded;
- ▶ Explain the purpose of the meeting and the information that will be provided during, and sought from, the meeting;
- ▶ Clarify any terms that you will use and with which the interpreter is unfamiliar with;
- ▶ Check that the interpreter understands any professional terminology you may use during the meeting;
- ▶ Ask the interpreter to alert you to any cultural or other issues which might lead to a misunderstanding or which may unwittingly cause offence;
- ▶ Respect the interpreter's judgement that a particular question may be culturally inappropriate and seek their advice in re-phrasing it or finding an alternative way to get the information you require;
- ▶ Check that the interpreter will keep the individual informed about what is happening; and,
- ▶ Allow more time for the appointment to take place as all discussion will have to go through the interpreter twice.

Professional interpreters will already be aware of best practice to ensure an effective interpreting relationship.

There are also simple steps that can be taken during the meeting to ensure it goes smoothly:

- ▶ Seating can be arranged so that it is informal and based on a 'triangle' pattern to ensure all parties can see and physical relate to each other;
- ▶ Check that the individual is happy to talk openly through the interpreter;
- ▶ Reassure the individual that all information will remain confidential;
- ▶ Speak to the individual directly and not to the interpreter;
- ▶ Speak at an even pace in short segments and take regular breaks to allow the interpreter to interpret;
- ▶ Be aware that many of the concepts and terms used will have no direct linguistic or conceptual equivalent in other languages and that the explanation given by the interpreter will take longer than your original words; and
- ▶ Avoid idioms, complicated sentence structure, fragmented sentences, asking multiple questions at one time and changing thoughts in the middle of a sentence.

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At the end of the meeting:

- ▶ Check that the individual is happy with the discussion and any outcomes agreed;
- ▶ Ensure they are clear about what will happen next; and,
- ▶ Discuss what information they need, for example, a record of the discussion in an accessible format.

As a final step the practitioner should:

- ▶ Have a brief post-meeting discussion with the interpreter to assess how the meeting went and to find out if there are any outstanding questions or concerns which may need to be followed up. 'Debriefing' is especially important where traumatic or very stressful circumstances have been discussed.

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