

**Keywords:** language barriers in healthcare

**Problem:** The language barrier between patients and healthcare professionals increases medical disparities. One in five households fluently speaks a language other than English. The NIH estimates that 25% of family member interpretations are incorrect. It is easy to see that language barriers can negatively impact medical care.

**Solution:** Providers can improve outcomes and reduce readmission rates with better communication strategies. This article highlights the implications of language barriers and how to address the concern.

## How Language Barriers Affect Healthcare and What to Do About It

*Aaliyah was showering when she felt a lump in her left breast. Soon after, she was diagnosed with breast cancer. Her husband, who spoke broken English, accompanied her to all her doctor's visits. Medical staff often relied on him to translate. However, unbeknownst to anyone, the interpretation of the medical information was frequently incorrect. Aaliyah's treatment suffered. She felt in the dark, unable to fully understand what was happening.*

*Approximately 25 million individuals in the United States have limited English proficiency (LEP). Language barriers pose problems, impacting patient and provider satisfaction. Additionally, the quality of care and safety suffer. Language barriers contribute to inequitable healthcare services and increased adverse events. This article discusses the impact of language barriers on medical care and how to address the concerns.*

### Key Takeaways

- Language barriers between patients and medical staff increase national medical disparities. The NIH estimates that 25 million people in the U.S. have limited English proficiency.
- Language barriers threaten accessible, equitable healthcare. More than 70% of LEP patients report not having access to interpreter services.
- In-person interpreters provide the best patient satisfaction and clinical outcomes. They are essential for patient education, admission assessments and discharge instructions.
- Mobile translation apps can help bridge the communication gap. However, medical staff should refrain from using these apps when discussing complex medical information.
- Language barriers commonly result in a "them and us" mindset. Clinicians communicate value by utilizing available interpreter resources, improving wellness and oneness.

# Implications of language barriers in healthcare

Language barriers lead to decreased patient satisfaction scores and subpar medical care. These factors can result in poor patient safety and outcomes. Patients with LEP often experience health disparity and higher rates of adverse events. The NIH reports that 30% of patients receiving care from nurses who do not speak their native language doubt the quality of care. Additionally, 50% assume their LEP contributes to medical errors. Many patients with language differences experience adverse health events, resulting in physical harm.

**More than 70% of LEP patients claim interpreter services were not accessible.** When translation services are available, patient and provider satisfaction increases to 92%. Patients who utilize translation services receive more preventive care than those who do not. Consequently, accessible communication services can improve outcomes and reduce readmission rates.

## Strategies for mitigating language barriers

In-person interpreter services deliver exceptional satisfaction, effective communication and positive clinical outcomes. However, interpreters can be stretched thin with services needed in multiple places. Medical staff often cope by utilizing family members and body language. The "getting by" communication strategy poses inherent risks. The National Institute for Health (NIH) estimates that **25% of family member interpretations are incorrect**. Are there better ways to mitigate language barriers while improving outcomes?

Interpreters are vital for medication education, admission assessments or discharge instructions. They ensure patients are equipped and supported. However, having access to around-the-clock interpreter services for in-patient care is impractical. Clinicians often rely on mobile translation apps to overcome daily communication barriers. These language tools are easy to access and helpful for simple phrases and questions. They can help bridge the communication gap in the following situations:

1. "Are you feeling pain?"
2. "Do you need help?"
3. "Can I get you anything?"
4. "Do you have questions?"

Healthcare professionals should use mobile apps cautiously since communication blunders are common. Medical professionals should not use translation apps to communicate complex medical information.

Telehealth translators are an affordable alternative to in-house interpreters. These video interpreter services deliver professional, HIPAA-compliant healthcare video translation services. These services are an affordable alternative to in-person interpretation. Translators for more than 100 languages and dialects are easily accessible. Patients and providers interact with a

real, live person. With a good internet connection, telehealth translators are on standby, ready to assist.

These vital interpretation tools help providers feel confident about their patient interactions. Patients feel better cared for and equipped for medical success. These evidence-based strategies improve outcomes and meet the Joint Commission requirements.

## Benefits of providing a professional interpreter

Patients with limited English proficiency often feel like outsiders. Offering interpreter services is one way to overcome the typical "them and us" mentality. This inequitable mindset devalues the individual and reduces the quality of care.

All medical providers must know their facility's strategy for mitigating language barriers. Making interpretation resources readily available for healthcare providers is an administrative commitment. However, the employees are responsible for promoting and utilizing these resources. **By fostering communication, we change social and institutional norms, improving wellness and oneness.** The results benefit everyone:

- Improved patient and provider satisfaction
- Better outcomes
- Less psychological strain
- Elevated patient understanding
- Improved medication compliance
- Greater access to preventive medicine
- Reduced acute healthcare needs

No one wants to feel in the dark regarding their medical care, and family members do not want the pressure of being their loved one's interpreter. Medical staff can mitigate these stressors. Utilizing interpretation services, whether in-person or telehealth, improves equitable healthcare.

## Enhancing outcomes with effective communication

One in five households fluently speaks a language other than English. Language barriers can negatively impact medical care. However, accessible interpreter services enhance outcomes and benefit everyone. **Innovative resources, proactive implementation, and administrative support reduce health disparities related to language barriers.**

Our hospital provides the tools to support communication, ensuring everyone receives support. If you are looking for a team passionate about accessible, equitable healthcare, look no further. We are your partner in care. Click the "Refer" button to get started.

## Resources

"Interpreter services and effect on healthcare - a systematic review of the impact of different types of interpreters on patient outcome." NIH: National Library of Medicine, 2023, Interpreter services and effect on healthcare - a systematic review of the impact of different types of interpreters on patient outcome - PMC.

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"Strategies for overcoming language barriers in healthcare." NIH: National Library of Medicine, 2018, Strategies for overcoming language barriers in healthcare - PMC.

"Testing the use of translation apps to overcome everyday healthcare communication in Australian aged-care hospital wards—An exploratory study. NIH: National Library of Medicine, 2022, Testing the use of translation apps to overcome everyday healthcare communication in Australian aged-care hospital wards—An exploratory study - PMC.