

# Working with Interpreters

## Fact Sheet



A certified interpreter is a trained, bilingual person, guided by a code of ethics.

### Why is it important to work with a certified interpreter?

A certified interpreter should be engaged when the information to be communicated is significant for health outcomes, because:

- it improves patient safety by reducing the risk of patients missing appointments, inappropriately taking medication or incorrectly following care instructions;
- it will enable you to fulfil your duty of care to understand and be understood by people receiving a health service from you.

- Concerns exist regarding the quality and accuracy of machine translation apps and devices. They should not be used in legal, health or technical fields
- Technology should only be used to supplement the engagement of certified interpreters, not replace them.

### Make sure an interpreter's time is used optimally

- Clients with interpreters should be seen as close to their appointment time as possible
- If the client fails to attend, ask the interpreter to call the client for follow-up.
- Make any further appointments while the interpreter is there.

Friends and family, especially children, should not be used as interpreters.

For further information, see the Queensland Government Language Services Policy:

<http://www.dlgrma.qld.gov.au/multicultural-affairs/policy-and-governance/language-services-policy.html>

**Interpreter services are provided free of charge to patients**



**Queensland Government**

# A

## Assess

# B

## Book

### How to identify if an interpreter is needed

- It's indicated in the client's notes, or they request one
- The client shows you a Queensland Government 'I need an Interpreter card', or similar
- Although a client may have a high level of English proficiency, it can decrease in times of extreme stress, illness and with ageing
- If a client continues to nod or says 'yes' to comments and questions, it may reflect a lack of understanding. It may be a culturally-based demonstration of respect for you as a health professional.

If unsure about whether a client understands what you are saying, you can assess their English skills:

- Ask a series of questions that require them to answer in a sentence. Avoid familiar questions such as 'Where do you live?' and questions that can be answered with 'yes' or 'no'
- Ask the person to repeat information you have told them, using their own words. This is known as the teach-back method.

If in doubt about a client's English language skills, offer them an interpreter.

### How do I book an interpreter?

An interpreter can be provided on-site or by phone.

You will need a Cost Centre number for bookings.

### On-site or phone interpreter?

Generally, on-site interpreters will be required for most health-related appointments. Phone interpreters can be engaged at short notice, such as:

- For simple administrative communication;
- When a person presents without an appointment;
- In medical emergencies;
- When an on-site interpreter is not available (e.g. rural or remote areas).

Phone interpreters may be more suitable in circumstances where:

- An on-site interpreter is not available;
- Privacy and confidentiality is important. A client may be concerned that the interpreter is a member of their direct community. Using a phone interpreter from interstate can help to preserve confidentiality;
- Patients are reluctant to use an interpreter (this is sometimes related to confidentiality concerns, as mentioned above).

### How do I identify the appropriate language?

Use the Queensland Health Language Identification Card. It contains the following statement in 66 languages: 'Please point to your language. We will arrange an interpreter at no charge'



### Need an Interpreter?



It is Queensland Government policy to use credentialed interpreters (for patient safety and duty of care).

#### If you require an interpreter

- **On-site interpreter:**  
Business hours - use Interpreter Management System (IMS) to book  
After hours - 4863 4444 or 3115 6999  
After hours Auslan - 0455 068 500
- **Telehealth (video) interpreter:**  
Business hours - Use IMS to book, ensure you enter the room number - CWR link.  
After hours - 3115 6999  
After hours Auslan - 0455 068 500
- **Phone interpreter:**  
All hours - 4863 4444 or 3115 6999

If you would like hard copies of the Language Identification Card or to create your HHS version of the 'Need an interpreter card', please contact Language Services Team on [language.services.program@health.qld.gov.au](mailto:language.services.program@health.qld.gov.au)

# C Communicate

## Conducting the session

### Introduction

- Explain the purpose of the session to the interpreter and how it will proceed.
- Introduce yourself and the interpreter to the client.
- Make sure the client knows you are conducting the session and understands the interpreter's role.
- Explain that you and the interpreter are bound by codes of ethics to maintain the confidentiality of the session.
- It's still your appointment to manage – it's not the interpreter's role to run the session, or to provide answers or explanations to questions from the client.

### Speaking style

- Speak a little slower than usual, in your normal speaking tone. Speaking louder does not help.
- Use plain English where possible. Avoid complex terminology, acronyms, jargon and slang. Ensure medical terminology is understood by the interpreter and the client.
- Use diagrams, pictures and translated written materials.
- Ask one question at a time. Pause after two or three sentences to allow the interpreter to relay the message.
- Be aware that it may take more words than you have spoken to convey the message.
- If the client does not understand, it's your responsibility (not the interpreter's) to explain more simply.
- Speak directly to the client and address them in first person. For example, "how are you feeling?" not (to the interpreter) "ask her how she is feeling"
- Be aware of non-verbal communication and verify its meaning in the client's culture.
- Be aware of your own non-verbal communication. Norms for direct eye contact, touch and proximity often differ among cultures.

### At the end of the session

- Check the client has understood key messages by using the teach-back method. Ask the client to summarise key points of the session and ask for any questions.
- Don't try to save time by asking the interpreter to summarise.
- If the client requires another appointment, do this while the interpreter is still there.
- Thank the client and say goodbye.
- In highly sensitive and stressful situations, give the interpreter an opportunity to debrief about their experience.

# D Document

## Where do I record the use of an interpreter?

- At the end of an on-site session, fill-in an Assignment Completion Sheet. The interpreter will have this for you to complete.
- Attendance of an interpreter at a client appointment should always be recorded in the client's EMR chart.
- If a client indicates a preference to manage without interpreter support, despite encouragement from clinical staff, this preference should be clearly documented in the patient's EMR chart.

## Additional resources

A suite of resources to support working with our culturally diverse communities is available on the HEAU QHEPS page: <https://qheps.health.qld.gov.au/metrosouth/heaumulticultural>

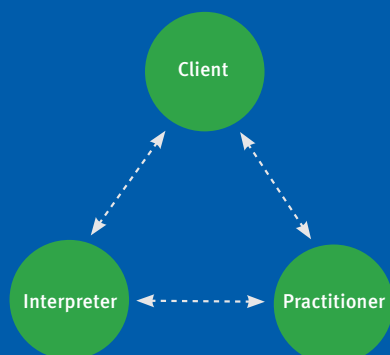
### Additional resources include:

- A series of videos that explain informed consent in multiple languages
- The NSW Refugee Health Service Appointment Reminder Translation Tool. Supported by MSH, this tool generates a simple one-page PDF of appointment details in 33 different languages.

The screenshot shows a web-based form titled 'NSW Refugee Health Service'. It contains several input fields: 'Client Name', 'Appointment with', 'Service's Address', 'Date of appointment', and 'Time of appointment'. There are also checkboxes for 'An interpreter has been organised?' and 'Type of appointment?'. A 'Language' dropdown menu is visible at the bottom right. The form is designed to generate a PDF of appointment details in multiple languages.

## On-site consultations

The ideal arrangement for communication when working with an interpreter on-site is for the client, health practitioner and interpreter to be seated in a triangular shape. This helps to enable a free flow of communication and presents an even distribution in the power relationship.



A triangular seating arrangement helps communication to flow freely between the client, health practitioner and interpreter.

## Quick-tip video resources

Search QHEPS for 'HEAU'. On the HEAU homepage select 'Multicultural communities', then 'Communication and language support tools'.

Metro South Health staff from the QEII, Logan and PA hospitals provide tips on:

- Assessing how to identify if an interpreter is needed
- How to book an interpreter online
- Communicating effectively with clients and interpreters
- How to document the use of an interpreter.



## For more information:

Contact the Language Services Team on

Email:  
[language.services.program@health.qld.gov.au](mailto:language.services.program@health.qld.gov.au)

Department of Health acknowledges Metro South Health, Health Equity and Access Team as the project lead.