



WE SPEAK TOGETHER TO IMPROVE PATIENT-PROVIDER COMMUNICATION FOR LATINOS

For the many Latino people in this country who speak little or no English, a visit to a hospital or doctor's office can be daunting. It may be hard to schedule appointments, discuss their health problems, and understand what they need to do to get better.

Women who do not speak English may be denied epidurals during labor and delivery because when doctors cannot communicate with them, they worry they will not catch warning signs; the risk to the mother and unborn child are too great.

Many doctors are doing their best to overcome these language barriers. Some are learning a second or even a third language, or making greater efforts to hire bilingual staff. These efforts, however, may not be enough. Research shows that when patients rely on untrained interpreters such as bi-lingual staff and family members, important information between a doctor and patient is lost in the translation.

In one instance reported by The Orlando Sentinel, the nurse gave simple instructions for treating a little girl's ear infection with an antibiotic, administered orally three times a day for ten days. But the translator mistakenly told the Spanish-speaking mother that the medicine was 'por los oídos' or "for the ears," rendering the instructions and the antibiotic useless.

Looking for Solutions to Language Barriers

Over the next three years, Hablamos Juntos—a program of The Robert Wood Johnson Foundation—is investing \$10 million in 10 demonstration sites nationwide to develop affordable language service models that improve the quality of health care for Latinos.

Non-English-speaking patients often defer needed medical care, are less likely to be given a follow up appointment after an emergency department visit, have fewer primary care visits and receive fewer preventive services than English speaking patients.

Latinos have higher mortality rates than Caucasians for tuberculosis, septicemia, chronic liver disease, cirrhosis, and diabetes. In general, death rates for Latinos aged 15-44 exceed those for Caucasians.

A Pressing Issue for Doctors and Patients

Currently numbering 38.8 million, Latinos are the largest ethnic minority in the U.S., and are now the largest ethnic group in the country. Approximately 14 million speak English with limited proficiency.

Language barriers can increase the likelihood of unneeded hospital admissions and diagnostic tests and cause unnecessary anxiety. Language barriers also have negative health impacts when they lead to confusion about diagnosis, instructions for medication and follow-up procedures.

Recent studies have shown that as many as one in five Latino patients who speak limited or no English do not seek care when they need it. Language barriers make a simple task like scheduling an appointment difficult, leading patients to skip preventive care, such as blood pressure tests and mammograms, and delay seeking health care until their health problems become acute. Patients with limited English may also experience frustration when trying to talk to the doctor or nurse about their health problems, or when trying to understand treatment recommendations from the doctor.

Research conducted by the Tomás Rivera Policy Institute found that low-income Latino parents did not enroll their children in health programs because they were less experienced in navigating the complex insurance system and because of they were not fluent in English.

Doctors and their staff encounter challenges too. Doctors need information from the patient to ensure the accuracy of their diagnoses. Language barriers make it difficult for a doctor or a nurse to take a patient's history and understand the nature of their symptoms. Not only that, doctors may find it difficult to explain treatment options and medication instructions. Doctors also report that they sometimes don't go into full explanations or offer preventative advice because they don't think patients will understand.

Language barriers limit doctor's treatment decisions. At a recent focus group, an ophthalmologist said he refused to do necessary eye surgery on a patient with one good eye, because he was afraid the patient who didn't speak English well would not understand the risk involved in the operation. Another doctor, a pediatrician, said she didn't give preventive advice to parents who spoke limited English because she didn't think they'd understand, even when an interpreter was present.

Breaking Down Language Barriers: A Unique Approach

Clear communication between a doctor and patient is essential to providing quality health care. Hablamos Juntos works with health care organizations, in both rural and urban communities with large Latino populations, to develop affordable language service programs that will help doctors, hospitals and their staff care for a changing patient population. Hablamos Juntos is reducing language barriers by focusing on three priority language services:

1. Increasing the availability and quality of interpreter services for Spanish-speaking patients in health care facilities. This will include developing community run college level training programs for training interpreters and piloting tools to assess language proficiency and interpreter readiness. It will also include systems change within health care organizations and the use of technology to enable communication with non English speaking patients where ever they seek care.

2. Providing useful health care related materials in Spanish.

This will include guidelines for developing materials that are more effective in conveying health information in a way that increases patient understanding than materials translated from English.

3. Developing easy-to-understand ways for non-English speaking patients to navigate health care facilities. This will include newly developed and testing symbols for health signage that will prove more effective at guiding patients.

Discovering Best Practices

Hablamos Juntos' 10 demonstration health care sites will develop and test best practices to break down the communication barriers that can compromise care. Once fully tested, health care organizations around the country can adopt these best practices to eliminate language barriers as a way to benefit both their own health care facility and the Latino patients they serve. Resources spent on this issue now will pay off through improved quality care and increased patient confidence.

To learn more about this effort and specific demonstration sites, visit:

http://www.hablamosjuntos.org/whoware/grantees_profiles.asp