



Language Services Can Increase Provider Productivity

Rashelle LeCaptain

Language services are viewed as a costly frustration and a fiscal burden on the health care organization. Providers look to keep costs down by trying to “get by” without a professional interpreter present. In an effort to keep costs down, organizations are hiring bi-lingual staff to both treat patients in their native language as well as to be used as interpreters when needed. Organizations often fail to provide language testing and interpreter training to these hires before using them in the second language. These un-screed staff and unqualified interpreters support the argument for a low return on investment in language services. In this scenario there is a loss for the organization because the value added for language services is minimal. Let’s review how an organization can increase their return on investment by increasing provider productivity.

The Frustration Factor

A significant challenge for providers is the feeling of disempowerment in managing the patient’s care. There is a sense of frustration that the interpreter has more control over the encounter than the provider. Providers are forced to alter their treatment routine because the interpreter is untrained. For example, the interpreter’s shortcoming may be in their lack of interpreter theory, the assume the role of patient advocate, or the interpreter is unfamiliar with the health care environment. These individuals are filling the role of interpreter because they want to help the community or they are there because they are least expensive.

A change in the provider’s routine will create inefficiencies that reduce productivity and challenge an already tight schedule. Decreased productivity and back logged schedules create additional costs, including decreased provider and subsequent patient satisfaction. The costs also include future appointments for limited English speaking patients be scheduled longer than the average English speaking patient for the same appointment type. Improved provider productivity when using language services can be addressed by understanding how a mono-lingual provider can manage the encounter without knowing the second language.

Neutrality Leads to Empowerment

Interpreter neutrality exists when the interpreter is perceived as neither advocating for the provider nor the patient. Room positioning will show that an interpreter is in a position where it is easy to hear and communicate between provider and patient.

In this setting the provider will observe the interpreter effectively communicating the message from them to their patients and vice-versa. This will be done in the first person. For example, the patient will say “I hurt my back.” The interpreter will then communicate to the provider “I hurt my back.” They will use the third person tense by saying “The patient said they hurt their back” or “she said she hurt her back”. Third person communication keeps the interpreter as a central player in the interpreted encounter when they should be neutral.

Additionally the provider and patient should hear all side conversation being interpreted. If a pediatrician is speaking to a young child this should be interpreted. Even if the child speaks English a parent’s trust in the provider comes from understanding the provider’s interaction with their child. Side conversation may also happen when the patient or the provider strikes up conversation directly with the interpreter, for example. The conversation should be communicated to the other party. This may lead to conversation that will build trust and a relationship for the patient and provider. This trust will lead to a patient being forthcoming with their problems. Before long the patient and provider will direct the conversation between themselves and they will continue to develop their relationship. The interpreter will then return to, and maintain, a neutral position.

Transparency is Key

Transparency in language services is visible to providers. Providers often encounter interpreters that seem to take too long to interpret segments. There are very short answers interpreted from the patient when it was observed that the patient had a lot to say to the interpreter. Health care providers need to be empowered to question the interpreter and the validity of the interpretation. Requesting a new interpreter and following up with recourse for the poor interpretation gives the provider control over the treatment of their patient.

A lack of transparency creates additional challenges that affect provider productivity and increase costs for an organization. Misinterpreted messages and concepts risk patient safety. The provider will run more tests and increases overall costs. This decision is often made due to provider uncertainty about the patient’s symptoms in relation to the health history provided by the patient through the interpreter.

You’re Leaving Now?!

Patient care is greatly compromised when interpreters leave an appointment unfinished to travel to their next appointment. Trust in the interpreter and the provider can easily be compromised and the provider’s job just became more complicated. This abrupt switch supports the argument that language services have little return on investment for the organization. There are funds wasted when encounters are started but not completed with an interpreter.



Logistical management is a large component to successful language services. An organization that manages interpreter schedules will aid a health care organization in handling unforeseen events that are inherent to health care encounters. Effective rescheduling of interpreters should not have any bearing on the health care organization as it is the responsibility of the language service provider to assure that the interpreter requests are filled. However, some instances are unique and language services providers are responsible for effective communication with their clients, the health care organizations. Notification of late arrival or necessary alternatives should be communicated as soon as an event is known. The effective management of language service logistics provides a greater return on investment for the language services used.

Conclusion

Providers can decrease their frustrations when working with language services using language service providers that are obviously neutral and empower the provider's ability to build a lasting relationship with their limited English speaking patients. An interpreter's ability to be transparent assures the provider that all communication with their patient is being effectively communicated. A proper logistical program for interpreters eliminates the provider's frustrations caused by interpreters leaving in the middle of appointments.

The utilization of trained professional health care interpreters increases a health care provider's productivity when they work with limited English speaking patients. Interpreters are an effective tool to be used by providers to assure patients, regardless of language, are receiving equal access to their health care services. When providers have access to language services processes and systems that effectively integrate into their existing practice, they will find a greater return on investment for their language services programs. Patient safety concerns will be reduced and provider and patient satisfaction will increase.