

Addressing Language Barriers in Healthcare

The Challenge:

Recent U.S. Census data indicate that 21 percent of people living in the United States speak a language other than English at home (Ryan 2013). In certain regions of the country this number can be more than double this national average. More than 40 percent of this national subpopulation report speaking English less than very well. These individuals are classified as “limited English proficient” (LEP) and are very likely to need translation assistance to effectively communicate in healthcare settings (Quan 2010). The Agency for Healthcare Research and Quality (AHRQ) reports limited English proficient patients are more likely to report poor communication with nurses and doctors.

Why Addressing the Language Barrier is Important:

Cultural and linguistic barriers to patient-provider communication are one of many factors impacting health care disparities in the United States. Factors commonly understood include race, ethnicity, socioeconomic status, age, location, gender, disability status, and sexual orientation. These factors impact both the access and the outcome of healthcare as individuals in these groups are more likely to receive lower quality care and some are less likely to seek care at all (Kaiser Family Foundation and AHRQ).

Communication is essential to meaningful patient care and safety. According to The Joint Commission, “individuals whose care is inhibited due to a communication barrier... may be at risk for poor outcomes” (Wilson et al. 2008). This is especially true when these communication issues are not addressed by healthcare facilities. Additionally, language barriers can have negative impacts on

medication compliance and patient satisfaction, and often result in more testing (Wilson et al. 2008). Growth trends in this sector of the population show that hospitals will continue to deal with the language barrier in years to come and in greater numbers. Without a policy plan in place, the increasing number of languages, dialects and cultures can be overwhelming to healthcare facilities and staff and will be a barrier to improving patient outcomes.

The issues of both cultural and linguistic barriers and their relationship to health and healthcare disparities is fueling a conversation surrounding cultural competence in healthcare. This is defined by the Commonwealth Fund as “the ability of systems to provide care with diverse values, beliefs and behaviors, including tailoring delivery to meet patients’ social, cultural, and linguistic needs.” To improve cultural competence in healthcare, the report encourages enhancing culturally and linguistically appropriate interactions with patients, and patient education programs that help minority patients navigate the health care system and taking on an active role in their care plan. (Commonwealth Fund)

Addressing linguistic and cultural disparities allows for a higher level of health literacy which leads to higher levels of health in minority populations. “Culture and language set the context for the acquisition and application of health literacy skills.” Addressing the language and cultural barriers are imperative as these barriers compound the negative effects of health literacy. (Online Journal of Issues in Nursing)

Key Ways to Overcome the Language Barrier:

Improving access to and quality of translation services, as well as offering health education materials in multiple languages, are key steps to help improve health literacy among LEP patients. Technology solutions, such as interactive patient engagement systems, enhance hospitals’ ability to overcome language barriers. Interactive patient engagement solutions enable facilities to offer patient- and condition-specific materials in the patient’s preferred language, as well as translation services in real-time at the bedside.

Results if addressed:

Addressing language barriers in healthcare settings enables effective communication between providers and patients which leads to increased positive patient outcomes, increased health literacy among LEP patient groups, and higher patient satisfaction among these patients.

About Allen Technologies

Allen Technologies, the pioneer of interactive patient solutions for nearly 40 years, transforms the way hospitals engage, educate and entertain patients. Allen Technologies helps hospitals impact patient outcomes, improve patient satisfaction and achieve operational efficiencies. Allen’s multiplatform interactive patient engagement system, delivered via television, tablet and bedside monitor, is a robust patient-centric portal for customized patient education, in-room comfort control, and entertainment. Allen is the leader in interactive patient engagement solutions for smart TVs. Allen’s E3 Patient Engagement Solution integrates seamlessly with electronic medical records and system platforms including HVAC, housekeeping and food service systems. Learn more at www.engagewithallen.com, www.twitter.com/allen_IPS or www.facebook.com/allentechnologies.

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