

Being a Medical Interpreter is More Than Being Bilingual

A bilingual person and a medical interpreter both speak two languages. A medical interpreter, however, must speak both languages at a demonstrated level of proficiency that goes well beyond conversational skill.

A medical interpreter is a professional who accurately and quickly converts messages between two languages. The interpreter has specialized skills that include

- Tracking rapid speech and complex sentences and anticipating word sequences
- Choosing expressions that capture culturally specific meanings of each language
- Transferring messages contained in tone of voice and body language, each of which varies across cultures
- Converting messages without omission or summary and without additions or comment
- Listening with focused attention over a sustained period of time, often amidst multiple distractions
- Utilizing a range of techniques to remember long and complicated messages
- Managing the flow of conversation and ensuring understanding
- Asking for clarification as needed in a manner transparent to both speaker and listener
- Maintaining neutrality and a professional boundary when transferring messages

A doctor and patient must clearly and accurately understand everything each other says. A medical interpreter is the bridge for safe, effective, equitable and cost-efficient health care for a patient with limited English proficiency.

A spoken language medical interpreter requires training in

- The National Standards of Practice for Interpreters in Health Care
- The National Code of Ethics for Interpreters in Health Care, including the practical implications of HIPAA confidentiality requirements
- Anatomy, physiology, common diseases and treatments, diagnostic procedures, and standard medical equipment and supplies
- The flow and etiquette of principal medical encounters as well as basic health insurance concepts and terminology