

## Why Relying on Family Members, Friends and Children is Not Advisable

There is some reliance that a patient's family members or friends can – or should – appropriately serve as interpreters. However, significant problems can arise from the use of family members, friends, and in particular, children rather than trained professionals as interpreters. Patients may suffer direct consequences because they do not fully understand a diagnosis or treatment. One study noted that interpreting errors by “ad hoc” interpreters, including family members or friends, are significantly more likely to have potential clinical consequences than interpreting provided by trained hospital interpreters. Using trained interpreters can ensure confidentiality, prevent conflict of interest, and make sure that medical terms are interpreted correctly.

Adult family members or friends who act as interpreters often do not interpret accurately. Untrained interpreters are prone to omissions, additions, substitutions, opinions and volunteered answers. For example, family members or friends may not understand the need to interpret everything the patient says and may summarize information instead. They may also insert their own opinions or impose their own judgment as they interpret. Family members and friends who act as interpreters may themselves have limited English language abilities and may be completely unfamiliar with medical terminology. Furthermore, many patients will not disclose sensitive or private information to family and friends: providers thus may receive incomplete information that can prevent them from correctly diagnosing the problem. For example, if a battered woman is brought to the hospital by her batterer, who is then asked to interpret for her, the battered woman is not likely to reveal the scope or cause of her injuries.

Guidance from the federal Department of Health and Human Services' Office for Civil Rights recognizes the drawbacks of using family members and friends and encourages the use of trained interpreters whenever possible.

While many problems can result from using family members and friends as interpreters, additional problems arise when the interpreter is a minor. Children who interpret for their LEP parents may act as “language brokers” and informally mediate rather than interpret or translate all information. Children who act as language brokers often influence the content of the messages they translate, which in turn can affect their parents' decisions. Other concerns when using children include:

- requiring children to take on additional burdens such as decision-making responsibilities.
- creating friction and role reversal within the family structure which can even lead to child abuse.
- violating beneficiary confidentiality, which can lead to inadequate services or mistakes in the provision of services.
- causing children to miss school.
- causing children anxiety concerning their parents' health issues.

These potential problems should caution health care providers from relying on family members, friends, and children to interpret in clinical settings, except in emergencies.