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Diversity: A Risky Business?

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Objective:

To explore the importance of health care interpreting in promoting patient safety.

Methods:

Patients from culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) backgrounds have been identified as vulnerable in the health system from a patient safety perspective.

Communication issues are a major contributing factor in patient complaints and incidents. An analysis of complaints data from one health care facility shows that communication and access represent 67% of all complaints. Likewise a study published in 1998¹ demonstrated that poor communication between patient and health professionals was the most frequent contributing factor in the reviewed incidents.

Sydney South West Area Health Service is the most ethnically diverse health area in Australia, with 39% of the population speaking a language other than English at home.

This paper will demonstrate through case presentations typical risks associated with non-use of interpreters and will reflect on some of the programs aimed to reduce risk and improve overall quality.

The programs include:

Inpatient Project - interpreters were allocated to promote the use of interpreting services to patients and health care providers in order to increase utilisation of the service within hospitals.

Arabic Call Patients Project - interpreters undertook to remind Arabic speaking patients of their appointments with the purpose of reducing the "fail to attend" rate.

Emergency Departments Booking Line - a separate line was introduced which escalates booking calls from Emergency Departments within the health area to the top of the call centre queue.

Talking Pictures - a communication tool with standard set of pictures with English and translated subtitles in 24 languages is used in inpatient areas to facilitate basic communication.

Results:

Prior to the introduction of the Pilot Inpatient Project only 9% of all interpreter bookings were for inpatients. During the project the volume of the appointments almost tripled at some sites. Following the introduction of the permanent Inpatient Project the percentage of the inpatient appointments has increased to 12.4%.

Arabic Call Patients Project - at the start of the project 14.4 % of outpatient appointments for Arabic patients were not attended. This was reduced to 8.3% during the 6 months of the project.

Emergency Departments Booking Line - all emergency departments use the dedicated booking line. A new clinical indicator was developed for this project whereby a response time in allocating interpreters to emergency departments is measured. The goal is a 30 minute response time for all calls.

Talking Pictures were first introduced in six languages and then expanded to 24 languages in 2004. They are used in all hospitals and there are many requests for their use from other health areas.

Conclusions:

Health services need to recognise and respond to significantly increased risk in health care faced by CALD patients. Interpreter services are essential to overcome challenges such as communication barriers.

Despite these successful initiatives recent incident data suggests that CALD patients are still strongly represented. A recent analysis of incidents related to wrong procedures and/or patients show a high proportion related to CALD patients.

With increasing pressures on the health system and increased patient turnover, it is imperative that health care providers are able to identify language barriers and have access to appropriate and adequate interpreting services to prevent future adverse outcomes for patients.