

# Assessing the need for an interpreter

This information sheet is one of a series produced by the Centre for Culture Ethnicity & Health (CEH) covering aspects of language services. It aims to enhance language services planning and practice for staff working with people with limited English proficiency.

This information sheet is for staff in funded agencies who are responsible for working with accredited interpreters. It provides basic information related to interpreting.

Victorians with limited English proficiency require some form of language service to overcome a language barrier in complex communication encounters with service providers.

The Victorian Government requires that government departments and funded agencies ensure people with limited English proficiency have the opportunity to participate in decisions that affect their lives. For more information go to

[www.multicultural.vic.gov.au/projects-and-initiatives/improving-language-services/](http://www.multicultural.vic.gov.au/projects-and-initiatives/improving-language-services/)

Whenever possible, the need for an interpreter should be decided before an appointment. This may be determined from information contained in a referral, when the client requests an interpreter, when you are assessing the need for an interpreter or by asking the client.

## Assessing the need for an interpreter

Assessing how well a person can understand and communicate in English is the first step in identifying the need for an interpreter.

Engaging an interpreter is recommended when the client:

- Requests it
- Speaks English as a second language and is in a stressful, complex or unfamiliar situation
- Is difficult to understand
- Responds only in a limited way
- Relies on family or friends to interpret
- Wishes to communicate in his or her preferred language
- Cannot grasp or respond to questions in English.

Remember, an interpreter serves not only the client. You can request an interpreter if you believe you need one.

To determine a client's level of English language proficiency, ask open-ended questions that require more than a 'yes' or 'no' answer, such as 'Why are you here today?'

## Determining the preferred language

A client's language cannot be determined reliably from their country of birth as many countries have multiple languages and dialects. Furthermore, a person such as an asylum seeker may not have spent much time in their country of birth. If unknown, a client's language can be determined by:

- Asking the client or person accompanying them (such as a family member, friend or support worker)
- Using a visual aid that lists languages, although be aware that this method assumes the client can read their own language (and note that some languages do not exist in written form)
- Contacting an interpreter agency, which may be able to assist you by engaging telephone interpreters.

## Offering an interpreter

How you offer a client an interpreter will affect the response you get.

**Poor:** "You (or the client) won't need an interpreter, will you?"

Asking the question this way discourages the client, or the person who is making the appointment, from asking for the language assistance that he or she may need.

**Basic:** "What language do you (or the client) speak at home?"

This question will give you information about the client's home language, but ignores the possibility that the client may be bilingual in English as well.

**Better:** "Will an interpreter be needed? In what language?"

This question may generate information on the need for an interpreter. On the other hand, many clients may reply 'no', believing that they have to either bring their own interpreter or have a family member interpret.

**Best:** "In what language do you (or the person for whom you are making the appointment) prefer we offer our service?"

Asking the question this way will provide you information on the language the client feels he or she needs to speak in a health or other service related conversation.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Adapted from Roat, CE (2005), *Addressing Language Access Issues in Your Practice: A Toolkit for Physicians and Their Staff Members*, California: The California Academy of Family Physicians

## If an interpreter is refused

If a client refuses the offer of an interpreter, it is important to try to clarify and address the reasons.

Reasons for refusing an interpreter	Possible remedial actions
<p><b>Don't know they exist</b></p> <p>Workers receive information, education and training about interpreters; people in the community generally do not. They are less likely to know that:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ Qualified interpreters exist.</li> <li>■ They are entitled to the services of an interpreter.</li> <li>■ Often there is no charge to the client for these services.</li> </ul> <p>Where people are aware that professional interpreters exist, they may not know the procedure to access them.</p>	<p>Inform people that interpreters are available and that they are free of charge to the client. This can be done at first point of contact with a service provider, by displaying information at reception, through letters sent out to clients/communities and at community consultations.</p>
<p><b>Preference for family or friends</b></p> <p>This may be for the abovementioned reasons of concern for confidentiality and privacy. There may be a sense of obligation for family members or friends to interpret as an extension of the support role they offer the client.</p>	<p>Explain that accepting support from family or friends does not need to extend to interpreting. Furthermore, the involvement of an accredited interpreter will relieve family members or friends of the burden of interpreting and free them to be fully engaged in a support role.</p>
<p><b>Pride or embarrassment</b></p> <p>The client may feel confident that he/she can competently communicate in English and understands everything that is being said. Alternately, the client may be embarrassed that his/her speaking and comprehension of English is not as good as it should be.</p>	<p>State that it is your organisation's policy that you are required to communicate via an interpreter when there is a language barrier. Alternately explain that it is YOU who needs the interpreter – for example: "In order for me to know that I am doing my job well, I need an interpreter."</p>
<p><b>Don't want to be understood</b></p> <p>This sometimes happens in issues related to compliance. This may be the case where the client fears prosecution.</p>	<p>Make sure that you go through all the options in addressing the client's concerns before documenting their refusal. You may need to have a co-worker in attendance to act as a witness.</p>
<p><b>Confidentiality, privacy</b></p> <p>Clients are concerned that they may know the interpreter and the interpreter will tell everyone the client's personal business.</p>	<p>Reassure the client by explaining the role of the interpreter and the requirement for interpreters to adhere to the AUSIT Code of Ethics, which includes confidentiality.</p>
<p><b>If a client continues to refuse an interpreter and you choose to continue with the appointment, document your concerns.</b></p>	<p>If this does not allay the client's concern you can take actions to conceal the client's identity by:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ Engaging a telephone interpreter</li> <li>■ Requesting a telephone interpreter from interstate (you may need to pre-book the interpreter)</li> <li>■ Using a false name to conceal the client's identity from the interpreter.</li> </ul> <p>It is best to discuss these strategies with your client first.</p>



### Information sheets in the CEH language services series

#### INTERPRETATION

1. Interpreters: an introduction
2. Assessing the need for an interpreter
3. Booking and briefing an interpreter
4. Communicating via an interpreter
5. Debriefing with an interpreter

#### TRANSLATION

6. Translation: an introduction
7. Planning for translation

#### BILINGUAL STAFF

8. Recruiting bilingual staff
9. Managing bilingual staff

#### ORGANISATIONAL RESPONSE

10. Developing a comprehensive language services response

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