



Can family and friends provide interpreting services?

Can family members and friends provide interpreting services?

There may be instances where, for practical reasons, a client's family member, friend or carer may be asked to interpret simple messages, such as where and when an appointment has been scheduled.

Where information is complex, technical or sensitive, it is strongly discouraged to rely on a client's family, friend or carer to provide interpreting. This can have serious consequences:

- filtering of information/ lack of impartiality
- breach of privacy and confidentiality
- lack of adequate language skills in both languages
- lack of understanding of subject matter or specialised terminology
- using information for private advantage or gain
- discomfort or embarrassment felt by the client in discussing personal matters
- where topic or context is traumatic, vicarious trauma to the person interpreting.

Example of filtering:

Doctor to patient: "I suggest a Pap test to rule out cervical cancer"

Patient's daughter interprets to her mother: "The doctor wants to do some tests, Mum"

In this example, the patient does not receive the doctor's full message. As a result, she is not given an opportunity to ask questions about the procedure and has not given informed consent.

Example of lack of understanding of specialised terminology:

Nurse to patient: "You should fast for one day before the operation", meaning the patient should have no food for 24 hours.

Patient's friend interprets fasting in the context of Ramadan (where devotees fast between dawn and sunset), and interprets, "the day before your operation, you should wait until after sunset to eat dinner"

In this example, the patient's friend is not familiar with medical term 'fasting' and so misinterprets the instruction from the nurse. As a result, the patient is placed at risk.

Children under 18 years of age are not appropriate interpreters

A child should not be asked to interpret in any context because:

- they almost certainly do not have the required interpreting skills
- the process can seriously distort power and authority relationships within a family
- the parent or service provider may not be able to disclose all the information in order to protect the child from information that is not age appropriate.

A role for support persons

Clients may bring a family member, friend, carer or other support person to any appointment to provide comfort or moral support. Be aware that, even in a support role, having a family member or friend present may create a conflict of interest. Refer to [Using interpreting services: conflict of interest](#).