

# Working with patients when there are language barriers

A guide to accessing and using the Translating  
and Interpreting Service for primary care health  
professionals working in private practice



# Using an interpreter

[www.tisnational.gov.au](http://www.tisnational.gov.au)

## Why should I use an interpreter?

Using an interpreter is vital to ensure that all patients attending your organisation are able to access health care equitably, regardless of their English language skills. Using a qualified interpreter is required for:

- acquiring informed consent
- to meet your legal obligations around patient safety.
- to meet your ethical and legal obligations around duty of care.

Using an interpreter provides clinical benefits:

- facilitating accurate diagnosis
- improving patient understanding
- enabling adherence to management plans
- offering health promotion information
- reducing unnecessary tests and procedures and
- increasing patient satisfaction.

This is consistent with *Good medical practice: a code of conduct for doctors in Australia* [www.medicalboard.gov.au/Codes-Guidelines-Policies/Code-of-conduct.aspx](http://www.medicalboard.gov.au/Codes-Guidelines-Policies/Code-of-conduct.aspx)

If a patient does not speak English (and you do not fluently speak their language) it is recommended that you use a professional interpreter.

Bear in mind that some patients may speak a bit of English but may not understand a medical consultation – interpreters should be used in these cases too. It is best practice to ask all new patients what their language preferences are and record these on their file.

## Why shouldn't I use a family member or friend to interpret?

Family members or friends may not have the required language competence or understanding of complex medical issues;

- they may lack impartiality
- they are not bound by the same standards of conduct as accredited interpreters, and
- patients may not wish to disclose/ discuss certain information in front of a family member or friend.

A family member or friend may be used on occasion, for simple day-to-day communication (such as booking an appointment), but an accredited interpreter for medical and/ or other complex discussions is strongly advised.

## What is the Translating and Interpreting Service?

The Translating and Interpreting Service (TIS) National allows organisations to communicate with non-English speaking patients, and enables individuals who do not speak English to independently access your organisation's services and information.

TIS National provides:

- immediate phone interpreting
- pre-booked phone interpreting
- pre-booked on-site interpreting.

Phone interpreting is accessible 24 hours a day 7 days a week; for less common languages it is advised to book ahead. Availability of onsite interpreters will depend upon a number of factors – pre-booking is essential.

## Doctors Priority Line

The Doctors Priority Line (DPL) is a free phone interpreting service which helps medical practitioners quickly connect to an interpreter.

TIS National gives priority to DPL callers over other callers in the queue. A phone interpreter will generally be provided within 3 minutes for common community languages.

## Which health professionals can access free interpreting services?

Private medical practitioners (General Practitioners and approved Medical Specialists) and pharmacies are eligible to access the Free Interpreting Service through TIS to assist in communicating with non-English speakers who have a Medicare card.

- Private medical practitioners can access the Free Interpreting Service when providing Medicare-rebateable services. Nurses, reception or other practice support staff can also access the Free Interpreting Service when working under the guidance of the registered Medical Practitioner.  
*For a list of approved Medical Specialists see: [Medical Board of Australia-Medical Specialties and Specialty Fields](http://www.medicalboard.gov.au/Medical-Specialties-and-Specialty-Fields)*
- Pharmacies are eligible to access the Free Interpreting Service for the purpose of dispensing Pharmaceutical Benefits Scheme (PBS) medications.

Some PHNs have free interpreting programs for allied health professionals, please contact your PHN.

**Please note:** If you are not eligible for any free interpreting services, you can still engage these services for a fee. Public organisations generally have their own arrangements for interpreters – contact the appropriate person in your organisation for more information.

# Getting your organisation ready to use TIS

## Step 1: Register your organisation or clinician with TIS

- Pharmacies register as an organisation and all staff use the one TIS code.
- Each medical practitioner must register for their own client code. Doctors need a client code for each practice they work in. Nurses and receptionists use the code for the doctor they are working with.
- Access the online registration form here: [www.tisnational.gov.au/agencies/forms-for-agencies/register-for-a-TIS-national-client-code](http://www.tisnational.gov.au/agencies/forms-for-agencies/register-for-a-TIS-national-client-code)
- When you register choose to **accept** calls to your agency initiated by your non-English speaking patients.
- Once registered, TIS National will email you your client code.

## Step 2: Inform all staff of your TIS client code/s

- Ensure the staff in your organisation understand how to use your specific code to book an interpreter for patients under your care.
- Ensure all relevant TIS numbers and client codes are readily accessible by staff because they must quote a code whenever they use TIS.
  - TIS phone number 131 450
  - Doctors Priority Line 1300 131 450

## Step 3: Provide your staff with training on how and when to use TIS

- This video provides hints and tips for working with interpreters: [www.tisnational.gov.au/en/Help-using-TIS-National-services/Videos/Hints-and-tips-for-working-with-interpreters](http://www.tisnational.gov.au/en/Help-using-TIS-National-services/Videos/Hints-and-tips-for-working-with-interpreters)
- This short video is particularly useful for general practitioners, specialists or pharmacists: [www.youtube.com/watch?v=MXy-QF9GHyM](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MXy-QF9GHyM)
- Face to face training may be available - contact your PHN for more information.



## Step 4: Make sure your patients know your organisation can access an interpreter if required

Clearly display the National Interpreter Symbol in your organisation so that patients know they can ask for language assistance.

[www.multicultural.vic.gov.au/index.php?option=com\\_content&view=article&id=76:national-interpreter-symbol-with-text&catid=22&Itemid=67](http://www.multicultural.vic.gov.au/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=76:national-interpreter-symbol-with-text&catid=22&Itemid=67)



Have this Language Card available (at reception, in clinical rooms) so your patient can point to their language, and you can arrange an interpreter:

[www.tisnational.gov.au/~media/Files/Promotional%20material/PDF/Language%20Card.ashx](http://www.tisnational.gov.au/~media/Files/Promotional%20material/PDF/Language%20Card.ashx)



Display these posters in your practice (they each contain different languages).

[www.tisnational.gov.au/~media/Files/Promotional%20material/PDF/TIS%20National%20Multilingual%20ePoster.ashx](http://www.tisnational.gov.au/~media/Files/Promotional%20material/PDF/TIS%20National%20Multilingual%20ePoster.ashx)

[www.tisnational.gov.au/~media/Files/Promotional%20material/PDF/TIS%20National%20Multilingual%20e%20Poster%20more%20languages.ashx](http://www.tisnational.gov.au/~media/Files/Promotional%20material/PDF/TIS%20National%20Multilingual%20e%20Poster%20more%20languages.ashx)



Once your patient's preferred language has been identified and recorded on their file, the patient can be given an 'I need an Interpreter' Card that they can keep in their wallet and present in future.

[www.tisnational.gov.au/en/About-TIS-National/Materials-to-help-you-access-an-interpreter/TIS-National-promotional-materials-catalogue](http://www.tisnational.gov.au/en/About-TIS-National/Materials-to-help-you-access-an-interpreter/TIS-National-promotional-materials-catalogue)



When referring your patient to another healthcare provider, clearly tell that provider that they will need language assistance.



# Tips for working with interpreters

## What kind of interpreter should I use?

**Immediate access to a phone interpreter:** Calling TIS (131 450) or the Doctor's Priority Line (1300 131 450) will connect you with an interpreter. The service has access to 2,500 interpreters speaking 160 different languages. You can do this during the consultation.

**Pre-booked interpreting:** Book an interpreter when the patient books the appointment. Pre-book in instances where the consultation may be complex, requires specialist knowledge or the availability of interpreters in a particular language is limited.

**Pre-booked phone interpreting** can be useful if the matter is sensitive and you can request an interpreter from another state.

**Pre-booked on-site interpreting** can be useful when the clinical concepts are complex and if there needs to be reading of any documents. On-site interpreting can be arranged for any location in Australia (subject to interpreter availability).

**Note** that some patients will prefer a phone interpreter for confidentiality, or a male or female interpreter. Always ask each patient their preference before booking an interpreter and record it on their patient file.

## General tips for working with an interpreter

1. Ensure you have provided enough time for the consultation because using interpreters might require more time than normal. Remember using interpreters will save time in the long run due to fewer repeat visits for clarification or failure to adhere to care plans.
2. Introduce yourself to the interpreter and explain the nature of the consultation – your relationship with the interpreter is important.
3. Introduce the interpreter to the patient. Explain your role and that of the interpreter.
4. Face the patient and speak directly with them, rather than the interpreter. Say 'How can I help you today?' rather than 'How can I help the patient today?' You may wish to sit in a triangle formation.

5. Watch for body language clues and address any questions you may have about these to the patient.
6. Periodically check that the patient has understood what you have said. Utilise the teach-back method  
[www.youtube.com/watch?v=d702HIZfVWs](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=d702HIZfVWs)
7. Speak slowly and clearly, use short sentences and ask one question at a time.
8. Pause to allow time for interpreting.
9. Avoid using jargon, slang, idioms or proverbs.
10. Don't have long private discussions with the interpreter in front of the patient. You can also stop any private discussion between the patient and the interpreter. If an interpreter needs to clarify something with the patient they should inform you before doing so.
11. When establishing a patient's history, be sensitive to the patient revealing personal information through an interpreter, particularly if the interpreter is a member of their community. If the patient seems uncomfortable with a particular interpreter, assure them that an alternative interpreter can be requested.
12. At the end, summarise what has been discussed and check that the patient understands the next steps.
13. Consider the needs of the interpreter. They may have heard distressing information and may need to debrief with you after the consultation.

## Working with phone interpreters

- Use a speaker phone if possible.
- If a speaker phone is not available use a hands-free phone if possible. Ensure the interpreter is aware that the handset will be passed between you and the patient. This will help ensure the message is not lost while passing the phone.
- Speak directly to the patient not the phone.



# Engaging interpreters: Tips for receptionists

## Identify if a patient needs an interpreter

Often patients will attend with a friend or family member who can communicate on their behalf for simple communications. However they shouldn't interpret medical and/or complex information. An interpreter should be used, including when completing practice forms.

Find out all new patients' preferred language (e.g. via registration form), and if they prefer a male or female, face to face or phone interpreter.

**\*Use:** Language card to determine patient's preferred language.



## Record these preferences in the patient's record

Add language spoken and tick 'interpreter needed' in patient details.  
Ensure this is clear on front page of record.

**Provide:** 'I need an interpreter' card that the patient can keep and show next time.

[www.tisnational.gov.au/en/About-TIS-National/Materials-to-help-you-access-an-interpreter/TIS-National-promotional-materials-catalogue](http://www.tisnational.gov.au/en/About-TIS-National/Materials-to-help-you-access-an-interpreter/TIS-National-promotional-materials-catalogue)



## If you need interpreting at reception

Call TIS 131 450 or  
Doctors Priority Line 1300 131 450  
Explain your role, that you are with a patient and the language you need interpreted.  
Quote your TIS client code.

**\*Refer to:** 'Tips for working with interpreters' sheet (page 4).



## Book an appointment for the patient

You may wish to book a longer appointment if the patient requires language assistance.  
Ensure the clinician knows about the patient's language needs.

**\*Refer to:** 'Tips for working with interpreters' sheet (page 4).



## Make sure an interpreter is used for the consultation

The receptionist can either pre-book an interpreter (phone or onsite), or the clinician can seek a phone interpreter when the patient attends for their consultation.

**To pre-book:** Go to [www.tisnational.gov.au](http://www.tisnational.gov.au) and click on link to the right hand side of page.  
You will receive a booking confirmation including appointment details.

Ensure clinician is aware interpreter is booked and that these details are documented in the patient's record.

If you have not pre-booked, make it clear to the clinician that they'll need to access an interpreter by phone during the consultation.



## After the consultation

Remember to organise a subsequent appointment before the patient leaves.  
You can use the Appointment Reminder Translation tool  
[www.swslhd.nsw.gov.au/refugee/appointment](http://www.swslhd.nsw.gov.au/refugee/appointment)

# Engaging interpreters: Tips for clinicians

## Receptionist has pre-booked an interpreter

The receptionist should have provided a booking confirmation including appointment details.

Follow the instructions on that confirmation.

The interpreter may be on phone or on-site.

If the interpreter hasn't arrived when the appointment is about to start, contact TIS.

Keep the documentation related to interpreter use (including the reference number) for medico/legal reasons even if the interpreter does not arrive.

## I need to organise an immediate phone interpreter

Call TIS: 131 450 or  
Doctor's Priority Line: 1300 131 450

Explain your role, that you are with a patient, and the language you need interpreted.

State your TIS client code.

Keep the documentation related to interpreter use (including the reference number) for medico/legal reasons even if the interpreter does not arrive.

**\*Use:** Language card to determine patient's preferred language if not known.



## Brief the interpreter

Introduce yourself and let the interpreter know the nature of the discussion to be had.

**\*See:** Tips for working with interpreters sheet (page 4).



## During your consultation

Phone interpreter: Use a speaker phone if possible and let the interpreter know they are on speaker. Speak to the patient directly, in the first person. Let the interpreter know if other people are in the room e.g. family members.

On-site interpreter: Sit in a triangle formation, but face and speak directly to the patient in first person.

Speak slowly and clearly, use short sentences and use the teach-back method to check understanding.

**\*See:** Tips for working with interpreters sheet (page 4).

# For more information

## Translating and Interpreting Service (TIS) website:

Go to [www.tisnational.gov.au](http://www.tisnational.gov.au) for a range of information about the service.

See the 'Contact us' page for the most appropriate phone number to call.

TIS national publications/resources are available at

[www.tisnational.gov.au/en/About-TIS-National/Materials-to-help-you-access-an-interpreter/TIS-National-promotional-materials-catalogue](http://www.tisnational.gov.au/en/About-TIS-National/Materials-to-help-you-access-an-interpreter/TIS-National-promotional-materials-catalogue).

## Health Translations Directory

Go to [www.healthtranslations.vic.gov.au](http://www.healthtranslations.vic.gov.au) for relevant and accurate translated health information.

## Refugee Health Resources

[www.refugeehealthnetworkqld.org.au](http://www.refugeehealthnetworkqld.org.au)

[www.materonline.org.au/refugeehealth](http://www.materonline.org.au/refugeehealth)

## Appointment Reminder Translation Tool

[www.swslhd.nsw.gov.au/refugee/appointment](http://www.swslhd.nsw.gov.au/refugee/appointment)

## Contact your PHN:

Brisbane South PHN: 07 3864 7555

Brisbane North PHN: 07 3630 7311

Darling Downs and West Moreton PHN: 07 4615 0900

Gold Coast PHN: 07 5635 2455

This resource has been adapted from  
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