

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Access to Language Interpretation in Healthcare

Wellesley Institute works in research and policy to improve health and health equity in the GTA through action on the social determinants of health.

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Statement on Acknowledgement of Traditional Land

We would like to acknowledge this sacred land on which the Wellesley Institute operates. It has been a site of human activity for 15,000 years. This land is the territory of the Huron-Wendat and Petun First Nations, the Seneca, and most recently, the Mississaugas of the Credit River. The territory was the subject of the Dish With One Spoon Wampum Belt Covenant, an agreement between the Iroquois Confederacy and Confederacy of the Ojibwe and allied nations to peaceably share and care for the resources around the Great Lakes.

Today, the meeting place of Toronto is still the home to many Indigenous people from across Turtle Island and we are grateful to have the opportunity to work in the community, on this territory.

Revised by the Elders Circle (Council of Aboriginal Initiatives) on November 6, 2014

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Summary

The Greater Toronto Area (GTA) is one of the most linguistically diverse regions in Canada. Approximately 1 in 4 people do not speak an official language (English or French) at home, and 1 in 25 people do not speak an official language at all. Yet despite the region's growing linguistic diversity, there is no guarantee that patients will receive health care in a language that they understand. As a result, patients with language barriers may have limited access to care or may receive poor quality care. Language interpretation services can help support clear and accurate communication between patients and providers. However, these services are not consistently available across the health care system. The Wellesley Institute recently completed a series of research on the topic including an analysis of patient rights in Ontario; a scoping review of evidence on the health impacts of language interpretation services; and an environmental scan of services currently offered in the GTA. The research demonstrates the value of language interpretation services for supporting equitable and high-quality health care in the GTA.

In the current system, many patients and providers in the GTA navigate language barriers without formalized support, relying instead on bilingual family members or hospital staff to facilitate communication. A rights-based analysis demonstrates that this approach may undermine a patient's right to informed consent. Ontario legislation states that patients must have a clear understanding of the risks and benefits of their care, but untrained interpreters like family members may not have the necessary knowledge of medical terminology to deliver accurate information. In addition, a patient must give consent voluntarily. When a family member facilitates communication between a patient and provider, they may influence the patient's decisions by leaving out information or offering their own opinions. Offering interpretation services from trained medical interpreters ensures that patients are given accurate, unbiased information about their care options, protecting their right to informed consent.

Moreover, a scoping review found substantial evidence that trained medical interpreters can contribute to more effective, efficient, and safe health care delivery. Interpretation services help providers to diagnose and treat health conditions more effectively. Studies have shown that patients who receive interpretation services have better clinical outcomes related to mental health, pain management, and stroke rehabilitation. In addition, interpretation services may contribute to a more efficient and appropriate use of hospital resources. Patients who receive interpretation services are less likely to be re-admitted to the hospital, and more likely to engage in preventive care like cancer screenings. There are many effective ways of delivering interpretation services: in-person, phone, and video interpretation can all be used to support high-quality health care in different clinical contexts. Regardless of the mode, evidence shows that trained medical interpreters are less likely than family members or bilingual hospital staff to make clinically significant errors that may negatively impact patient safety.

Many health care organizations throughout the GTA have already implemented interpretation services to support their patients who speak different languages, as highlighted in an environmental scan and key informant interviews. These organizations recognize that interpretation services are an important component of delivering equitable care to diverse patient populations. Accessible, high-quality language interpretation services require adequate training for interpreters and providers alike. Offering a range of options including in-person, phone, and video interpretation can facilitate uptake in different clinical contexts. Successful interpretation services also need a foundation of supportive organizational leadership, adequate and sustainable funding, and ongoing monitoring and evaluation.

Clear and accurate communication between patients and providers is a critical element of safe, appropriate, effective care. This research demonstrates that providing interpretation services is an important investment towards health care quality and health equity. Some local health care organizations have successfully implemented interpretation programs in response to growing linguistic diversity in the GTA. However, these services are not always available to the patients who need them. Expanding the availability of interpretation services across the GTA will be an important step towards delivering excellent care for all patients, regardless of the language they speak.

Key Resources

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