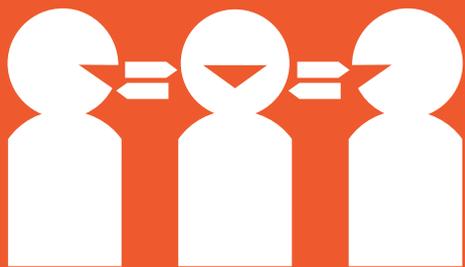


# Working with patients when there are language barriers

A guide to accessing and using the Translating  
and Interpreting Service for 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, and to meet your legal obligations around patient safety and duty of care.

Using an interpreter also provides clinical benefits including:

- facilitation of accurate diagnosis
- improvement of patient understanding
- adherence to medication and treatment plans
- ability to offer health promotion and prevention programs to patients
- reduction in unnecessary tests and procedures and acute care utilisation, and
- increases in patient satisfaction.

## When should I use an interpreter?

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 know enough to 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 a family member is not recommended:

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

1. Family members may lack impartiality.
2. Family members are not bound by the same standards of conduct as accredited interpreters, and
3. Patients may not wish to disclose/ discuss certain information in front of a family member.

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) 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 has access to over 2500 contracted interpreters across Australia, speaking more than 160 different languages.

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.

## Can I access free interpreting services?

The Translating and Interpreting Service (TIS) is free to use if:

- you are a general practitioner, or a nurse or receptionist working under the guidance of a general practitioner, a pharmacist or specialist in private practice.
- you provide a service under the Medicare Benefits Schedule or a medicine under the Pharmaceutical Benefits Schedule.
- your non-English speaking patient is either:
  - an Australian citizen
  - a permanent resident (resident with a permanent visa), or
  - a resident with a Temporary Humanitarian Stay (subclass 449) visa, a Temporary Humanitarian Concern (subclass 786) visa, a Temporary Protection (subclass 785) visa or a Safe Haven Enterprise (subclass 790) visa.

Other individuals or organisations may also qualify for free access. You can check here:

[www.tisnational.gov.au/en/Agencies/Charges-and-free-services/Free-services-through-TIS-National](http://www.tisnational.gov.au/en/Agencies/Charges-and-free-services/Free-services-through-TIS-National)

**Please note:** If you are not eligible, 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 the Translating and Interpreting Service (TIS)

- Pharmacies register as an organisation and all staff use the one TIS code.
- If you are a general practice or private specialist practice, each doctor must register for their own client code. Codes are linked to their medicare provider numbers. Nurses and receptionists use the code for the doctor they are working with.
- Access the online 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)
- Choose to **accept** calls to your agency initiated by your non-English speaking patients.
- TIS National will email you your client code as soon as possible.

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

- All receptionists, administrators, nurses, doctors, pharmacists and specialists should know the code/s – every one is allowed to use an interpreter to talk to a patient.
- Stick labels on all computers and all phones stating:
  - TIS Doctors Priority phone number: 1300 131 450
  - your TIS client code/s.
- Staff must quote a code whenever they use the TIS service.
- You may wish to put the phone number on speed dial for easy access.

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

- This video provides hints and tips for working with interpreters: <https://www.tisnational.gov.au/en/About-TIS-National/Videos/Hints-and-tips-for-working-with-interpreters-video?&title=Hints and tips for working with interpreters video&>
- This short video is particularly 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 they can access an interpreter

Displaying the National Interpreter Symbol in your practice indicates to people with limited English that 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)

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)



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)



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

Templates in various languages are available here: [www.multicultural.vic.gov.au/projects-and-initiatives/improving-language-services/victorian-interpreter-card](http://www.multicultural.vic.gov.au/projects-and-initiatives/improving-language-services/victorian-interpreter-card)



# Tips for working with interpreters

## What kind of interpreter should I use?

**Immediate access to a phone interpreter:** Calling the Doctor's Priority Line (1300 131 450) will connect you with an interpreter usually within 3 minutes. The service has access to 2,500 interpreters speaking 160 different languages. You can do this during the consultation.

**Pre-booked phone interpreter:** 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 on-site interpreter:** On-site interpreting services can be arranged for any location in Australia (subject to interpreter availability). It may be most appropriate when:

- you have a scheduled appointment with a patient who has requested one
- the appointment is of a sensitive or serious nature
- you anticipate that the appointment will go for an extended period of time.

**Note** that some patients will prefer a phone interpreter for anonymity, 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, given that using interpreters will require more time than normal (but save time in the long run due to fewer repeat visits for clarification or failure to adhere to care plans). Note that some MBS items are complexity and time-based (including health assessments and GP mental health treatment plans).
2. Introduce yourself to the interpreter and explain the nature of the consultation - your relationship with the interpreter is important. Ask the interpreter if there are any relevant communication norms you should be aware of before the consultation (e.g. levels of acceptable physical touch or eye contact, common health beliefs), and always confirm these with the individual patient.

3. Introduce the interpreter to the patient. Explain your role and that of the interpreter.
4. Tell the patient that they can ask questions at any time and can request that the interpreter leave the room at any time during the consultation.
5. 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?'
6. Watch for body language clues and address any questions you may have about these to the patient.
7. 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)
8. Speak slowly and clearly, use short sentences, and pause to allow time for interpreting.
9. 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.
10. 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.
11. At the end, summarise what has discussed and check that the patient understands next steps.
12. Consider the needs of the interpreter - consider that they may have heard distressing information and may need to debrief with you after the consultation.

## Working with phone interpreters

- Use a hands-free phone if possible.
- If a hands-free phone is not available, tell the interpreter 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.

## Working with on-site interpreters

- Sit in triangle formation
- Face the patient and speak directly to patient rather than interpreter.



# Receptionist

## 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 during consultations.

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, and add to 'Warning' box on front page of record so it is clear on first glance.

**\*Use:** Print off an interpreter card that the patient can keep and show next time:

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



## If you need interpreting at front desk

Call 1300 131 450 (Doctors Priority Line)

Explain who you are, that you are with a patient, which language you need interpreted. Quote your doctor's TIS client code.

**\*Refer to:** 'Tips for working with interpreters' sheet.



## Book an appointment for the patient

Allow double the amount of time that you would give to an English speaking patient.

Ensure the clinician knows about the patient's language needs.

**\*Refer to:** 'Tips for working with interpreters' sheet.



## 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. Provide these to the clinician.

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.

# Clinician



## 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.



## I need to organise an immediate phone interpreter

Call Doctor's Priority Line: 1300 131 450

You will go to the front of the queue, which usually connects you with an interpreter within 3 minutes.

Explain who you are (e.g. a GP), that you are with a patient, and which language you need interpreted.

State your TIS client code.

**\*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.

Ask if there are any relevant social or cultural communication norms you should be aware of beforehand. Confirm these with your individual patient.

**\*See:** Tips for working with interpreters sheet.



## Deliver your consultation

Phone interpreter: Use a hands-free phone if possible and let the interpreter know they are on speaker. Speak to the patient directly, in the first person.

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

Speak slowly and clearly, break information into chunks and use the teach-back method to check understanding.

**\*See:** Tips for working with interpreters sheet.



## Debrief with your interpreter

It is important to debrief with your interpreter.

If a follow-up meeting is required, request the same interpreter, but note that it may not be possible.

Remember that your patient may have revealed information about torture and trauma which may affect the interpreter, especially if they have come from similar circumstances.

If your consultation contained potentially distressing content, encourage the interpreter to make use of debriefing structures at TIS.



# For more information

## Visit the 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).

## Visit the Health Translations Directory

Go to [www.healthtranslations.vic.gov.au](http://www.healthtranslations.vic.gov.au)

for relevant and accurate translated health information.

## Contact your PHN:

North Western Melbourne PHN: (03) 9347 1188

South Eastern Melbourne PHN: (03) 8514 6699

Eastern Melbourne PHN: (03) 9046 0300

