



## Tackling Cross Cultural Communication Challenges in Healthcare

By Kari Heistad, CEO, Culture Coach International

Everyday America becomes more diverse, and subsequently, your patient population. This diversity creates the challenge of how to provide quality care to patients who may speak different languages, come from different cultural backgrounds or who practice different faiths. Good communication is key to not only interacting with patients but also in providing quality diagnoses and treatments. But bridging the communication and cultural gaps can be time consuming and stressful to staff who are already stretched thin by increased workloads and budget cuts.

Communication impacts every aspect of the patient/provider relationship. The challenges with communication often arise even before the patient arrives for care. Setting up an appointment is daunting for people with limited English and it may also account in part for late or missed appointments due to miscommunication. Once a patient arrives, it may be difficult to navigate the facility and to complete written forms. And when the patient is with the healthcare provider, there are the challenges of eliciting and sharing accurate information.

Addressing cross-cultural communication challenges allows providers to schedule, process, diagnose and treat patients more effectively and with better results. This, in turn, provides a positive boost to the bottom line.

While the challenges of addressing communication concerns can seem overwhelming, here are practical steps that you can use to begin the process of providing culturally appropriate care. Initial steps include:

1. **Patient surveys:** Ask your patients to complete a short survey that asks about their cultural backgrounds, their language(s) and their experiences with your healthcare center. Use these surveys to discover the areas of highest concern to your patient population. For example, patients may feel that providing signage in their language is a key priority so that they can navigate your facility easily. Save these surveys to serve as a benchmark for future evaluation.

2. **Translate Key Information:** Having learned from your survey what other languages are spoken by your patients, translate routine information for them. This could include signs giving directions, intake or insurance forms, and standard instructions for common procedures. Simple and accurate is vital here. Some general health information that is already translated can be found at: <http://user.pro-ns.net/~larue/> or <http://www.multilingual-health-education.net/#top>.



3. **Quick Identification:** Create a small identification card that can be left at the reception desk. Combine country flags or maps from your highest population groups with the languages that are spoken in those countries. When someone arrives who cannot speak English, this card is a quick way for the patient to inform the administrative staff as to what kind of translator is needed. For free flags and country maps use the World Factbook at: [www.cia.gov](http://www.cia.gov).

4. **Phrase Pages:** Creating one-page “phrase pages” can save valuable time. These pages have common phrases translated in your key language(s) beside their English meanings. They can then be read by staff members and patients. These pages can include phrases such as: "Please have a seat" or "The doctor will be with you soon." Give these pages out liberally throughout your institution.

5. **Training:** Basic cross-cultural training for all staff members helps everyone to understand communication trends and styles from around the world. The better your staff understands their own American assumptions when they are communicating with their patients, the quicker they will be able to put these assumptions aside. This, in turn, will help them to better understand their patients and their patient's needs.

By taking these steps, you can process and treat patients more effectively and efficiently. This will reduce employee frustration and turnover; and also increase patient retention and satisfaction with the services provided. Patients are becoming more diverse, but by taking proactive steps to help bridge the communication gaps, you can provide quality healthcare within the increasingly competitive healthcare environment.

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