Languages In The Healthcare Setting As Diverse As The Patients

By Katherine A. Margolis, PhD

Activating your cross-cultural outreach is no longer an attractive growth strategy; it’s the only way to remain viable in today’s diverse health care marketplace.

Every day, millions of Americans manage chronic conditions and others are diagnosed with acute conditions. It can be daunting for them to gather information, find specialists, navigate insurance coverage, and begin treatment—all while dealing with the medical condition diagnosed. These patients also must navigate a changing healthcare environment impacted by the Affordable Care Act (ACA) and, increasingly, by new technologies that seem to arrive daily.

Now imagine those patients whose first language is not English. Or those whose cultural background differs from their healthcare provider’s. These differences in language or culture can pose barriers to effective communication, which can greatly impact the quality of healthcare that patients receive or their ability to self-manage their condition.

A new report by HealthEd Academy, the ‘think tank’ of HealthEd, found that 48% of
healthcare extenders surveyed often or sometimes experience a situation in which language differences between them and a patient or family member prevents effective communication. These healthcare extenders—non-MD healthcare professionals who work directly with and on behalf of patients—reported that they make efforts to meet the needs of culturally diverse patient populations; however, they still worry that their patients and family members may not truly understand the information. They also worry that their patients may not understand the medical need for a lifestyle change or treatment plan. Further, they say patients may lack the ability to make the needed change if it conflicts with their cultural beliefs.

The report, “Engaging Patients From Multicultural Backgrounds,” details the findings from a survey of 192 healthcare extenders and in-depth interviews with 4 experts. The survey was conducted to gain a better understanding of how healthcare extenders care for diverse populations. Specifically, HealthEd Academy wanted to understand what challenges healthcare extenders face in providing quality healthcare to a changing patient population. Respondents were recruited through SurroundHealth (www.surroundhealth.net), an online community for healthcare reform. Long-term care planning. Obesity prevention. Medicare. WIC. Smoking cessation.

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While 94% of healthcare extenders surveyed said Spanish was one of the 4 most common languages spoken by their patients, many other non-English languages also made the cut. Source: HealthEd Academy
Who Are The Healthcare Extenders?

While navigating the health system, most patients are likely to interact with healthcare extenders. Healthcare extenders are non-MD healthcare professionals who work directly with and on behalf of patients—including registered nurses, certified diabetes educators, social workers, and dietitians. Moreso than physicians, healthcare extenders often are the professionals who educate patients and family members and support chronic health management. Because healthcare extenders play such a key role in healthcare, HealthEd Academy seeks to get their insights on key health topics.

HealthEd Academy was specifically interested in the role that culture and language play in healthcare as the US population continues to diversify. The US Census Bureau estimates that by 2050, racial and minority groups may account for almost half of the US population. Despite the diversification of the US population, persistent healthcare disparities continue to exist. Race, ethnicity, and ability to speak English may impact the quality of care patients receive. It is particularly important to understand the barriers to providing quality care for all patients as the ACA emphasizes prevention and engaging patients as partners in care.

Spanish Is Just The Start

One of the key findings to emerge from the survey is that the populations that healthcare extenders serve are truly diverse. Although English and Spanish were the mostly widely reported languages, healthcare extenders report that they also see patients who speak languages including Chinese, French, Italian, Japanese, Polish, and Portuguese. And when asked which top 4 languages their patients speak, 4 in 10 healthcare extenders selected “Other.” This was a surprising finding, since respondents were able to choose from the top 10 most-spoken languages in the US, per recent Census data. For healthcare marketers, it suggests that offering patient communications only in “popular” languages may not be meeting the needs of healthcare professionals seeking a much broader spectrum of language-appropriate resources.

Due to the number of languages spoken by patients, the survey found that many healthcare extenders report using interpreters. Healthcare extenders who work in hospital settings report having greater access to interpreters (87%) than do healthcare extenders in non-hospital settings (69%). Many of those using interpreters report using phone-based interpreter services, such as MARTI. Although many extenders report having interpreters available, this finding does reveal that there is still work to be done to ensure that all patients are understood.

The report also found that the diversity of languages can present a real challenge for creating adequate patient education programs. This is particularly true for take-home patient education materials. Many healthcare extenders surveyed develop their own materials for use and 42% of respondents translate patient education materials into other languages. However, almost half of all respondents reported that they do not have access to patient education materials in the languages they need. Just as many respondents report needing materials in Chinese as Spanish/Spanish Creole (18%). And it is not just language differences that present barriers to effective patient education: 44% of respondents are often or sometimes uncertain how to best educate a patient or family member because of cultural differences.

The data on languages, combined with the report’s other topics—including patients’ comfort-level with the healthcare system, the impact of community workers, and the use of educational technology—all tell the story of an increasingly diverse patient base. This growing base has created gaps that are impeding healthcare extenders’ ability to effectively communicate with and educate patients. Without effective communication, patient care is likely to suffer. The survey findings underscore the need to make working with patients from diverse cultural backgrounds a top priority in healthcare—for the sake of patients, as well as marketers.

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