



## THE ROYAL AUSTRALIAN COLLEGE OF GENERAL PRACTITIONER

### Fact Sheet: Caring for patients from the Deaf community

#### **Criterion 1.2.3: Interpreter services**

Our practice has policies and procedures for communicating with patients who are not proficient in the primary language of our GP(s).

#### **Indicator A**

Our GP(s) and staff who provide clinical care can describe how they communicate with patients who do not speak the primary language of our GPs (interview).

#### **Indicator B**

Our practice has a list of contact numbers for interpreter services (document review)

Deaf people and hearing impaired people are not the same, and they do have differing needs.

Deaf people are people with varying levels of hearing loss who identify themselves as Deaf and as part of the Deaf community in Australia. Deaf people predominantly use Auslan (Australian Sign Language) as their first language. This is the language that is most accessible for them and that works best for them. Many are not fluent in English.

Hearing impaired people generally do not use Auslan. They are usually fluent in English. Hearing impaired people are usually people who have lost their hearing after they have acquired spoken language.

Most Deaf people have been deaf from birth or early childhood – i.e. their deafness is pre-lingual. Some are fluent in Auslan but not in English. Some are fluent in both languages. Some have limited fluency in both languages. Some learn to speak well and some do not. Some can lip read quite well and some cannot. The reasons for these variations are many and varied and include choices made early in their lives about their access to language and education. Many have not had full access to education, so their knowledge of the world around them may be more limited than for people who have had good access to education. Some are highly confident and independent and some are not.

In dealing with patients who are Deaf, it is important that general practices and staff consider how to modify their services to accommodate the needs of these patients.

#### **Communicating with a patient who is Deaf**

Principles include:

- Do not verbally call the Deaf person. Instead, attract their attention visually. To do this, wave gently in their field of vision or touch the person gently on the shoulder or arm.
- Face the person who is Deaf when you are speaking to them.
- Don't cover your face or mouth.



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- Speak clearly and at a normal pace, as exaggerating speech or volume distorts speech patterns.
- Write down what you want to say, especially if the Deaf person asks you to.
- Ask open-ended questions to verify that the person who is Deaf understands what you have told them or asked them.
- Write down instructions if they are complex. Use plain English. Draw diagrams.
- Ask the person if they need an Auslan interpreter. If so, arrange one for them.

### **Attendance at the practice by a patient who is Deaf**

A prominent note on the patient's file may assist practice staff to offer appropriate assistance to the patient who is Deaf, e.g. ensuring the appropriate length of appointment is made available, an interpreter is booked and is present at the time of the appointment; the need for a visual cue when the Doctor or other staff is calling them, or sending a text message to the patient's mobile phone (most people who are Deaf use the vibration feature on mobile phones).

Longer appointments may need to be offered for patients who are Deaf, so that there is sufficient time to allow for interpreting and to make sure information is communicated and understood. A longer appointment time will not always be needed but should be offered. Advocates for Deaf people have pointed out to the RACGP, in a submission received for the Standards review, that people who require a longer appointment due to a disability should not be charged a higher fee.

### **Using Auslan interpreters**

People who are Deaf use Auslan interpreters. Professional interpreters undertake rigorous training, are accredited by the National Accreditation Authority for Translators and Interpreters (NAATI) and abide by a Code of Ethics.

Professional interpreters are available, free of charge, for private health appointments anywhere in Australia, from the National Auslan Interpreter Booking and Payment Service (NABS). This service is funded by the Commonwealth Government and is free to the Deaf person and to health practitioners. To book an interpreter phone 1800 24 69 45; fax 1800 24 69 14; or email [bookings@nabs.org.au](mailto:bookings@nabs.org.au). For information about NABS, go to their website [www.nabs.org.au](http://www.nabs.org.au)

Some people who are Deaf may not be aware that they are entitled to the services of a professional interpreter free of charge. Practices should therefore ensure that patients who are Deaf are aware of the availability of this service. This information could be included in the practice information sheet.

When booking an interpreter through NABS, the booking can be made either by the patient or by the practice staff. Practice staff need to communicate with the patient to ensure both they and the patient know who is making the booking. If practice staff are making the booking, they need to ask the patient for the names of the interpreters they prefer. (See the NABS website [www.nabs.org.au](http://www.nabs.org.au) for information about how the service



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works.)

It is not advisable that practices use friends and family to interpret, unless they are an interpreter accredited by NAATI. Using unqualified family members or friends to interpret may lead to incorrect interpreting and may breach patient confidentiality. There may be times when the patient prefers to use family or friends to interpret.

When working with an interpreter remember the following points:

- Address and maintain eye contact with the patient, not the interpreter
- Usually the interpreter sits next to the doctor so that the patient can easily see both the doctor and the interpreter; this assists the patient to pick up visual cues
- The interpreter is there to interpret what the doctor says and what is signed by the patient and nothing more; care needs to be taken to ensure the interpreter is not put in the position of being a substitute for the patient.

### **Receiving and returning calls from a patient who is Deaf**

People who are Deaf use a telephone typewriter (TTY) to make and receive phone calls. A TTY can only talk to another TTY.

Phone calls between a person with a TTY and a person who does not have a TTY are made through the National Relay Service (NRS). A relay officer types for the TTY user what the voice caller is saying and reads out for the voice caller what the TTY user is typing.

Practices that have a lot of patients who are Deaf may consider installing a TTY and letting their Deaf patients know that they have a TTY. Ensure that staff are trained in the use of the TTY. TTYs can be obtained from commercial companies such as Deafness Resources Australia, Printacall or Word of Mouth Technology (see contact details below).

Practices without a TTY, may use the NRS. For information about the NRS, phone 1800 555 660. To make calls via the NRS phone 133 677.

Other methods of communication that can be used with patients who are Deaf include SMS on mobile phones, fax and email.

### **Health information**

Many people who are Deaf are not fluent in English. Complex medical information provided in English may be difficult to understand.

Practice information sheets and written patient health information needs to be in plain English. Adding diagrams and pictorial information can enhance understanding.

When communicating health information verbally be sure to use communication methods in which the patient who is Deaf is proficient and comfortable. These communication methods include:



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- Using an Auslan interpreter
- Speech, aided listening and lip reading (however be careful to check that lip reading is accurate – only about 30% of speech is visible on the lips)
- Note writing
- SMS
- Email
- TTY

### Resources

Information on various issues including communicating with Deaf people can be obtained from many different organisations:

Australian Association of the Deaf: [www.aad.org.au](http://www.aad.org.au)

Deaf Society in each State:

Queensland: [www.qds.org.au](http://www.qds.org.au)

NSW: [www.deafsocietynsw.org.au](http://www.deafsocietynsw.org.au)

Victoria: [www.vicdeaf.com.au](http://www.vicdeaf.com.au)

South Australia: [www.sadeaf.org.au](http://www.sadeaf.org.au)

Tasmania: [www.tasdeaf.org.au](http://www.tasdeaf.org.au)

Western Australia: [www.wadeaf.org.au](http://www.wadeaf.org.au)

Various organisations supply technology to assist organisations to communicate with Deaf and hard of hearing clients:

Deafness Resources Australia: [www.deafnessresources.net.au](http://www.deafnessresources.net.au); phone 1800 555 201

Printacall Communications Technology: [www.printacall.com.au](http://www.printacall.com.au); phone 02 9809 2392

Word of Mouth Technology: [www.wom.com.au](http://www.wom.com.au); phone 03 9729 9974

For information about the National Relay Service:

Australian Communication Exchange National Relay Service:  
[www.aceinfo.net.au](http://www.aceinfo.net.au)

To book an Auslan interpreter:

National Auslan Interpreter Booking and Payment Service  
[www.nabs.org.au](http://www.nabs.org.au)