

Quick guide to working with interpreters

We all deserve to be understood - Professional interpreting, NAATI certification and safe general practice care

When should I engage an interpreter?

- ✓ the patient requests an interpreter
- ✓ the patient has limited capacity to grasp or respond to questions in the language you speak or responds in a limited way
- ✓ the patient speaks English as a second language and it is a complex or stressful situation
- ✓ the patient indicates that they want family or friends to interpret
- ✓ the patient is using a translating app such as Google Translate
- ✓ the patient is deaf or hard of hearing, requiring an Auslan interpreter
- ✓ you believe you require one to exercise your professional duty of care towards a patient.

Who can interpret this consultation?

	Low risk (such as appointment scheduling)	Consultation about sensitive subjects (sexual health, mental health, domestic violence)	Could misunder- standing result in patient harm?	Providing a diagnosis	Receiving consent
Professional interpreter	YES	YES	YES	YES	YES
Bilingual staff (other than clinicians)	Maybe	Not recommended			
Bilingual person	Maybe				
AI tools	Maybe				

It's your responsibility as a GP to ensure an interpreter is engaged if you and the patient can't understand each other well due to a language barrier.

If in doubt, engage a professional interpreter.

How do I access an interpreter?

- Check your eligibility for the Australian Government-funded Free Interpreting Service available to eligible GPs and practice staff working in private practice:
<https://bit.ly/FIS-eligibility>
- If you or your clinic is not eligible for free interpreting services, you can contact another language service provider to set up an interpreting arrangement. A list of NAATI-endorsed language service providers is available on the NAATI website:
<https://directory.naati.com.au/>
- Contact the National Relay Service (NRS) to communicate with patients who are deaf or hard of hearing. Visit <https://bit.ly/nrs-help>



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What to do during the consultation

1. If possible, provide the interpreter with a brief on what will be discussed, including if the content will be emotional, technical or sensitive.
2. Introduce the interpreter to the patient and explain their role to the patient.
3. Ensure your patient understands that the interpreter is obliged to keep the consultation private.
4. Speak directly to the patient rather than to the interpreter. For example, say “are you having any chest pain?” instead of “ask her if she’s having any chest pain”. Maintain eye contact with the patient rather than the interpreter.
5. Use clear, simple language and pause regularly to give the interpreter time to interpret.
6. Clarify as needed. If something seems unclear for either you or your patient, ask the interpreter to repeat or explain. Encourage the interpreter to speak up if they need something clarified. If the interpreter needs clarification, ask them to inform the other person what they are asking.
7. Debrief with the interpreter if necessary, especially if it has been an emotional or distressing topic. This allows you to check on their wellbeing and also to receive feedback. It is possible that the interpreter could have a background history of trauma in the past and sensitive issues can be unexpectedly triggering. Interpreters have access to a mental health support line from NAATI if needed.

Billing for interpreted consultations

When claiming for time-tiered MBS items, the total duration includes the time required to communicate effectively with the patient. This includes the time required to work with an interpreter. Some examples of MBS items for longer consultations that may be required when working with interpreters are outlined below.

MBS item	Item description
36	Level C standard consultation 20–40 minutes
44	Level D standard consultation 40–60 minutes
123	Level E standard consultation 60+ minutes
91801	Videoconference level C standard consultation 20–40 minutes
91802	Videoconference level D standard consultation 40–60 minutes
91920	Videoconference level E standard consultation 60+ minutes
91900	Telephone level C standard consultation 20–40 minutes (MyMedicare patients only)
91910	Telephone level D standard consultation 40–60 minutes (MyMedicare patients only)



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