

# *Telephone consultations with patients requiring an interpreter*

## Information and support for GPs



This document provides guidance and support for general practitioners (GPs) providing telehealth consultations with patients who require an interpreter.

As GPs have rapidly made the shift to telehealth to ensure ongoing care during the COVID-19 pandemic, it is important that the same continuous, high-quality care is provided to patients from non-English-speaking backgrounds.

The Royal Australian College of General Practitioners (RACGP) has developed a [suite of resources](#) to support GPs and practices with continued care provision during the COVID-19 pandemic, including guidance for telephone and video consultations. We recommend that you read relevant resources from this suite in conjunction with this resource.

People from culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) backgrounds have multiple barriers when accessing healthcare, including language barriers, health literacy issues and difficulty navigating the healthcare system. In some cases, these difficulties will be exacerbated with the increasing use of telehealth in general practice and the broader healthcare system.

Equitable access to primary healthcare services via telehealth for the CALD community is vital to ensuring vulnerable people do not miss out on essential care.

The Australian Government's Translation and Interpreting Service (TIS) has a Doctor's Priority Line, and as a GP you are eligible for a free TIS code. If not already registered, general practices can register each doctor in the practice by calling 1300 131 450 or by visiting <https://tisonline.tisnational.gov.au/RegisterAgency>. If you work across multiple practices/organisations you will require a different TIS code for each.

## How to set up a conference telephone call with a patient and an interpreter from TIS – Information for reception staff and GPs

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- Call the TIS Doctor's Priority Line when you're ready to undertake a consultation/need to speak with patient.
- Specify the language.
- Ask to be connected to a three-way conference call.
- Provide the patient's phone number.
- Wait for the TIS operator to connect to the interpreter and the patient.

**Note:** TIS can be booked in advance, which is recommended if the language required is not common.

For common languages, you can connect to a TIS interpreter in approximately 2–3 minutes.

TIS does not have the capacity to offer three-way videoconferencing. While not ideal, a workaround is to use teleconferencing with TIS for audio and set up a separate videoconference with your patient via [healthdirect](#) (or another videoconference service) and keep on mute. You will have a visual connection with your patient, but the interpreter won't.

## Supporting patients who need an interpreter when booking a telephone or video consultation

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Patients from non-English-speaking backgrounds may need the assistance of an interpreter both when they are booking a telephone appointment with the practice receptionist and when having the appointment with you. It is important that your general practice has systems and processes in place to ensure that people from non-English-speaking backgrounds don't face any unnecessary barriers when accessing healthcare from you and don't avoid accessing healthcare if they are concerned about using telehealth.

Practices/reception staff should:

- ensure patients can easily request an interpreter for their telehealth appointment, whether booking on the phone or via the online booking service
- ensure patients know that, in most cases, they can still access their GP for face-to-face appointments in the practice if they need to
- explain to patients that the GP will connect with the interpreter first and will provide the interpreting service with the patient's phone number. The interpreting service will then link in the patient to the conference call.

**Note:** Patients who are unfamiliar with this process may need to be alerted (eg via text message sent prior to the appointment) to ensure that they know to expect the private incoming call from the TIS operator.

Make sure this information is provided clearly on your practice's online booking system.

Reception staff may need to ask patients who call to make a telehealth appointment whether they would like an interpreter. Even if a patient seems proficient in English, they may still prefer to use an interpreter and speak to you in their first language.

Patients can request an interpreter directly through TIS to help them when contacting your practice to book an appointment.

## Notifying GPs when an interpreter has been booked for appointments

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- Ensure your practice has a system to clearly notify the consulting GP when the consultation is via telehealth and will require an interpreter.
- Ensure all GPs in your practice are aware of the process for connecting to an interpreter for the telehealth appointment.

## Connecting the telephone consultation

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You should:

- connect with the interpreting service
- provide the patient's phone number
- wait for the interpreting service to connect to the interpreter and the patient
- document the TIS job number in the patient's clinical record
- check audio/visual quality with both the patient and interpreter (noting that the interpreter might need to begin translating at this point)
- explain to the patient what will happen if the call disconnects (again noting that the interpreter may need to translate these instructions to the patient)
- begin the consultation.

## Undertaking the consultation

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- Begin the consultation (refer to the RACGP's [Telephone and video consultations in general practice: Flowcharts](#)).
- Speak slowly.
- Speak to the patient, not the interpreter – use first-person language when speaking to the patient.
- Allow time for the interpreter to interpret the elements of the consultation to the patient.

**Don't say:** *Can you ask the patient if the headaches have persisted since they last saw me in the practice?*

**Say:** *Have your headaches persisted since the last time I saw you for an appointment in the practice?*

## Ending the telephone consultation

- Wrap up the consultation, noting all of the considerations in the [Telephone and video consultations in general practice: Flowcharts](#).
- Double-check that the patient does not have any questions arising from the consultation or require clarification or additional information. Consider using [teach-back](#) to check the patient's understanding.
- Thank the patient and interpreter and disconnect the call.

## Additional resources

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### RACGP

[Australian Family Physician](#), 'Using interpreters: A guide for GPs'

[Generally speaking](#) podcast, 'Refugee and asylum seeker health'

[Providing patient care during COVID-19 – Telehealth resources](#)

### Other

[Centre for Culture, Ethnicity and Health](#), 'Using teach-back via an interpreter'

[National Auslan Interpreter Booking Service](#), [Video Remote Interpreting \(VRI\)](#)

[Translating and Interpreting Service \(TIS\)](#)

[TIS National](#), promotional materials

[Guide for clinicians working with interpreters in healthcare settings](#)

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