LETTERS

Optimizing the Involvement of Language Interpreters During the Clinical Encounter

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To the Editors:—Johnson et al. write in their Comment¹ about creating a continuum of language interpreter participation in physician–patient interactions. We fully support this notion. Our novel, self-guided, medical Spanish curriculum,² which empowers residents to flexibly improve their medical Spanish skills, utilizes medical interpreters as teachers both in the classroom and in the exam room, fostering a relationship that enables the team to function along this continuum.

Since its establishment in 2010, over 100 residents from at least 12 graduate medical education training programs at our hospital have participated, and the course has grown to offer advanced, intermediate and beginner level instruction.³ One aspect of this multi-faceted course involves the participation of Spanish language medical interpreters from the hospital's Office of Interpreter Services, who facilitate monthly group sessions. Our interpreters serve not only as instructors, reviewing material learned during the independent portions of the course, but they also serve as standardized patients, allowing residents to practice clinical encounters in Spanish based on the particular system of the body reviewed that month. During these interactions, learners have the opportunity to gain confidence in both their medical Spanish skills and also their familiarity interacting with interpreters. It is not uncommon for the residents to work with these interpreters around the hospital during a typical day, participating together in actual patient encounters.

These varied interactions in different settings help to build a better working relationship, one that is founded in

teaching, flexibility and familiarity. So too, it allows the resident to more effectively function along the continuum of medical Spanish skills, at times feeling more comfortable in the interpreter's presence to take charge in speaking Spanish directly with the patient, and at other times seeking additional interpretation help.

One of the goals of our medical Spanish course is to allow residents to become proficient enough with their Spanish skills to be certified by the Office of Interpreter Services as independent speakers of Spanish during patient encounters. This is the same exam that the interpreters themselves would be given, and can help our residents gain yet another layer of understanding about the role and qualifications of medical interpreters.

Keeping the authors' suggestions in mind, we may be able to more formally use our already established framework to evaluate the logistics and feasibility of utilizing medical interpreters along a continuum, thus fully optimizing our ability to effectively communicate with patients.

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