

CANCER TREATMENT

Conveying Care

CTCA medical interpreters help keep the conversation flowing—in Spanish, Mandarin and a number of other languages.

By Erin Brereton



After moving from Costa Rica to the U.S. in 1997, communication issues during a doctor's visit prompted Mercedes Illescas to begin learning English at a local city college and apply to the medical translation program at University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA), to obtain her Certified Medical Interpreter certification.

"It was frustrating. People [at the doctor] talked to me in Spanglish," Illescas says. "I understood half of what they were saying. Especially with medical terminology, it can get really complicated. I decided to go to UCLA because of my experience. I didn't want other people to go through that."

After finishing the program, Illescas was working as an interpreting services contractor when she was contacted by a Cancer Treatment Centers of America® (CTCA) employee who was in charge of the interpreting services department. Not long after they spoke, she started working as a Certified Medical Interpreter at CTCA® at Western Regional Medical Center (Western) in Goodyear, Arizona.

She has worked there for more than five years as a Spanish-Certified Medical Interpreter and patient advocate.

"It's so funny. I used to see the commercials on TV and always said I want to help people, I hope someday I could work there."

Instructional Support

CTCA makes sure medical interpreters who speak Spanish, Russian and a variety of other languages are always available.

Interpreters, who are part of the Western Patient Relations department, accompany patients to each appointment to provide interpreting services at the time of the doctor's treatment plan, test results and scans to explain information in meticulous detail. After the appointment is finished, the interpreter will be available to accompany the patient to the pharmacy located at the hospital to interpret the pharmacist's instructions regarding the prescribed medications.

"If they need occupational therapy, we'll go to that appointment to interpret what the therapist is asking them to do," Illescas says. "We are always ready to step in as needed during their journey."

The interpreters stay with a single patient throughout all of the person's medical appointments. To ensure patients receive consistently clear communication, interpreters typically interact with four to nine clinicians a day.

"Patients' [language needs] are covered at all times," Illescas says. "Everybody in the hospital knows the language services number to call in case there is a language barrier in any way. We really enjoy helping patients however we can to make life a little bit easier."

A Personalized Approach

Having a medical interpreter also helps facilitate the doctors' role, according to medical oncologist and hematologist Alan Tan, MD, medical director of hematology and immunotherapy at Western.

"Without an interpreter, if you're not communicating with the patient about the proper dosing schedules, for example, that could be disastrous," Dr. Tan says. "It's always comforting to have interpreters there. I know patients accurately understand what I'm saying."

Although Dr. Tan, who studied Spanish in high school and college, can often understand some of his Spanish-speaking patients' comments, he's found having someone to interpret medical terms and other care-related information during patient visits can be particularly helpful.

"I can't explain [everything] fluently," he says. "I can't imagine trying to explain complex concepts like oncology [in a foreign language]. Having an interpreter is great. They're very well-versed and know how to communicate those things to patients in the right way."

During the course of their treatment, as interpreters escort patients through each visit—accompanying them to appointments; providing them with translated versions of medical documents as needed—patients and interpreters tend to spend a significant amount of time together. Often, Illescas says, they form a bond.

"We try to keep the same interpreter with the same patient so they get to know each other very well, and the patient can trust the interpreter and start building a professional relationship with them," she says. "You get so close to the patients. One of the things I hear a lot is that they feel like this is their second home after two or three visits. A lot of people are happy here because they know this place is not just about medicine—it's about treating them like family."

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