

## Medical interpreters turn to new video tool Technology lifts language barriers inside hospitals

Victoria Colliver, Chronicle Staff Writer  
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Dr. Susan Ehrlich asked her patient, 68-year-old Manubhai Patel, about his blood sugar counts and how he's been managing his diabetes.

Patel answered in his native Hindi. But no interpreter was in the room to allow doctor and patient to communicate. Instead, a portable device with a screen transmitted the image and words of interpreter D.C. Maharaj from a different part of the building.

San Mateo Medical Center, where this demonstration took place, is one of three county hospitals to adopt the new videoconferencing interpretation system to aid treatment of non-English speakers. While similar technology is in place at other medical centers, the Health Care Interpreter Network in San Mateo, San Joaquin and Contra Costa counties may be the first to link multiple hospitals and allow them to share interpretation services.

Medical interpretation is more than an amenity. About 1 million HMO members with limited English proficiency are at risk of receiving lower-quality health treatment because of language barriers, a UCLA study released in May found.

California law has required hospitals to provide language assistance since 1990. The state is finalizing a new law that requires state-licensed managed-care plans to pay for interpretation services.

Interpreters often are not available when needed, especially in rural hospitals and for less commonly spoken languages. In those cases, telephone interpretation can be arranged but often patients rely on family members, even children, and such situations can be awkward and foster miscommunication.

"At best, in these situations, you'll have less than top-quality health care. At worst, you'll have a serious medical error," said Nancy Steiger, chief executive of San Mateo Medical Center.

The Health Care Interpreter Network uses software produced by San Jose's Cisco Systems Inc. to route calls and a videoconferencing device made by Tandberg Corp. The technology allows interpreters at different hospitals or other remote locations to be connected within seconds to a doctor and patient.

Hospital executives would not specify the cost but said the devices are relatively inexpensive. They said the system allows in-house interpreters to be three to four times as productive because they don't have to travel throughout the hospital or between clinics. And hospitals can use interpreters at other locations, giving them access to a wide range of languages.

Fernando Ibanez, a full-time Spanish interpreter at San Mateo Medical Center, said he used to be able to see about eight patients a day. Now he handles 18 to 22 calls each day.

"When the doctor is ready and the patient is ready, I'm there," he said.

Patients generally prefer face-to-face interactions. But the video system was accepted and patients liked it better than telephone interpreters, said Anthony Wright, executive director of Health Access, a health advocacy group.

"You could see the person's face, so that allowed the patient to feel comfortable," Wright said.

Maharaj, a certified Hindi interpreter who works full time as a senior accountant at the San Mateo hospital, said it doesn't take patients long to get used to the video device.

He asked Ehrlich's patient, Patel, how he liked the interpreter service.

"He's quite happy with this new system," Maharaj said, interpreting Patel's answer.

"He's able to access this in a very short time."

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