

LANGUAGE, CULTURE AND PATIENT SAFETY

by Dave Gourley RRT



As all of us have witnessed, demographic changes in the United States over the past several decades have been significant. Today, there are more than 28 million Americans who are foreign-born, compared to less than 10 million in 1970. There are more than 300 different languages spoken in our country, and nearly one in every seven Americans speaks a language other than English in their home. While the social impact in our country is evident, the impact in healthcare does not have such widespread recognition. The Joint Commission points out that the lack of sensitivity and responsiveness to the linguistic needs and health beliefs of these different cultures impact quality of care, patient safety, and patient satisfaction.

The Joint Commission recognized that one of the ongoing challenges for healthcare organizations was meeting the needs of this increasingly multicultural society. As a result, JCAHO initiated a 30 month research project in January 2004, funded by the California Endowment, to look at how hospitals across the nation provide healthcare to diverse populations. The project team concluded their work in June 2006. Their results, a document entitled *Hospitals, Language, and Culture: A Snapshot of the Nation*, will become a foundation for hospitals to meet the cultural and linguistic needs of the populations they serve.

The 2 1/2 year project included development of a data collection methodology, a purposive sampling strategy, on-site data

collection at hospitals across the country, data analysis, and communication of the results. The purpose of the project was not to develop new standards or set new requirements for JCAHO accredited organizations, but to better understand current practice and develop recommendations to assist healthcare providers with this complex issue. The data collection phase resulted in hospital site visits to sixty different hospitals that volunteered to participate in the study. The data coding and analysis phase is currently being finalized and the results will be publicly available in the near future.

Culturally competent healthcare, according to the Office of Minority Health (OMH) is defined as "services that are respectful of and responsive to the health beliefs and practices, and cultural and linguistic needs of diverse patient populations." The OMH also identifies that health care providers and organizations must be able to understand and respond effectively to the cultural and linguistic needs of patients during their healthcare experience. Cultural and linguistic competency has been described as "a set of congruent behaviors, attitudes, and policies that come together in a system, agency, or among professionals that enables effective work in cross-cultural situations. Culture refers to integrated patterns of human behavior that include language, thoughts, communications, actions, customs, beliefs, values, and institutions of racial, ethnic, religious, or social groups. Competence implies having the capacity to function effectively as an individual and an organization within the context of cultural beliefs, behaviors, and needs presented by consumers and their communities." (Cross, et al, 1989)


The JCAHO standards currently contain many standards that address the provision of culturally and linguistically appropriate services. Some elements of performance address the issue directly, while others support organizational functions. One standard (IM.6.20) in the Management of Information chapter, requires that the medical record include the patient's language and communication needs. In addition a standard in the Ethics, Rights, and Responsibilities chapter (RI.2.100) requires written information be provided in the language of the patient, as appropriate to the population served, and that interpretation, including translation, services be provided as necessary. Other applicable standards can be identified in your standards manual or on the JCAHO website.

The Joint Commission has compiled a list of resources including websites, guidelines, toolkits, and other information dealing with language, culture, diversity, and healthcare. The resource list and further information regarding the Hospital, Language, and Culture: A Snapshot of the Nation project is available at the JCAHO website, www.jointcommission.org/hlc.

As previously noted, research has shown that limited understanding of information provided in English to non-English speaking patients does have an effect on both quality of care and patient satisfaction. In addition, lack of sensitivity by caregivers to the dynamic effects of culture will have a similar effect. As the Joint Commission notes, this is more than simply a patient's right, it is a key factor in the safety and quality of patient care.

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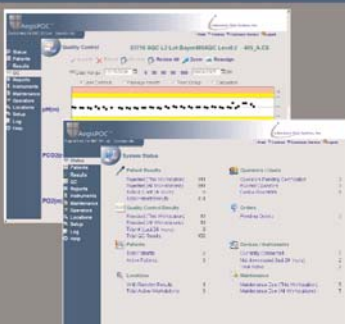
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