

TIPS FOR WORKING WITH TRANSLATORS

Effective use of a translator is an important skill if you do not speak the local language. Even when both parties speak the same language, the opportunities for misunderstandings occur frequently. Appropriate health care and successful projects depends upon clear, accurate communication and mutual understanding between all participants. On mission fields where the volunteers, staff, coworkers, and/or patients do not share linguistic and cultural background, the possibilities for miscommunication are endless with an even greater potential for harm. Follow these guidelines to help the translator communicate what you say.

Get to Know Your Translators

Spend time before starting work to get to know your translator. Ask questions about their education, translating experiences, family and interests. By asking questions that require more than a yes or no answer you can help determine how well they can understand what you are saying and communicate thoughts and facts. Ask for their input regarding how to facilitate communication. Many of our translators have been helping teams for years and may have greater experience than you, be open to their suggestions.

Appreciate Your Translator's Expertise

Although the translator's role is primarily to transmit the message, they have an "insider's" knowledge of local customs and practices and can be invaluable in helping you understand a specific situation or patients' unique needs and concerns. A good translator can put an appropriate cultural filter on the communication and avoid potential embarrassment or misunderstanding. After you have experienced a few complicated negotiations through a translator, you'll have a much better appreciation for having someone who knows the language and culture there to help!



Decide on Technique

There are three interpretation methods that you can use separately or in combination; the method you use depends upon your circumstances and prior experience of you and your translator. Be very specific as to how you wish to have something communicated

- Thought for Thought interpreting: you can have a complete conversation with the translator and then let them speak on your behalf
- Consecutive interpreting (sentence-by-sentence or section-by-section): Usually the most effective mode of interpreting in a medical setting: ask the translator to interpret everything said exactly: add nothing, omit nothing and change nothing.
- Simultaneous interpreting: Your translator "whispers" a translation as you are talking - in many cases this may be too distracting when working in a mission setting.

Tips for the Medical Clinic Setting

- Begin the session by introducing yourself and your translator and assure the patient that all conversations are private, and will remain confidential.
- Position the translator behind the patient or slightly off to the side; always focus on the patient. Maintain eye contact and speak directly to your patients, NOT the translator.
- Everyone wants to be treated with dignity and respect. Your patience and warmth can help overcome any language barrier.
- Health care often requires communicating in a direct and exact way and about matters considered embarrassing or private. Let your translator know that it is ok to repeat exactly what the patient says even if it is upsetting or unpleasant.
- Always allow your translator and patients to ask questions. The best way to ensure that they have understood your explanations and instructions is to ask them to repeat back to you what was said.

Working with Translators

- Speak slowly and clearly. Pause after a thought or phrase (if not too long), or after major points have been made. Asking a translator to remember long sentences or passages can lead to omissions.
- Use simple language: Avoid using technical vocabulary, slang, jargon, or colloquial expressions.
- Speak at normal volume. Speaking louder does not help anyone understand better and may be intimidating to patients, co-workers, staff and translators.
- Try to avoid excessive gestures and body language, few gestures and signs are universally understood and could have offensive connotations in different settings.
- Humor often does not travel well. Avoid jokes and humorous stories, even teasing can be open to misunderstanding within different cultures.
- Watch your translator to be sure he/she is keeping up with you. Allow the translator time to interpret; do not interrupt them when they are speaking.
- Even if you do not understand anything said; the time spoken in each language should be about the same. If you talk for 20 seconds and the translator only speaks for 5 seconds, something probably got lost in the translation. The opposite is true as well.
- Watch the body language of the person you are trying to communicate with; if it does not match what you would expect from someone who understood your language, something is wrong.
- Plan for breaks for both the translator and you - usually after 1-2 hours – many translators are reluctant to interrupt a session so it's up to you to stop for water and bathroom breaks.
- Never assume that people do not speak English (or any other language), just because they do not say anything. Making this assumption can lead to embarrassing situations.

Show Your Appreciation

Developing a good relationship with your translator not only benefits the team members, staff, co-workers and patients but ultimately the success of our missions in Haiti. Show your appreciation for your translators' hard work and contributions. Say "thank you" (Mesi) often.

Sharing a lunch or snack with our translator is allowed but is not encouraged or expected. Translators should NOT be given any monetary compensation beyond their daily pay. In the past HOM encouraged teams to reward translators with lunches or a small gift at the end of the week however recent events have necessitated a change in our recommendations. HOM strongly discourages this practice, as it is not possible to provide special gratuities to all employees of the ministry. To single out translators for special treatment creates jealousies and divisions with other employees that may result in long-term consequences that will last well beyond a team's stay in Haiti.



If a team wishes to acknowledge their translators' hard work, Thank you notes or "Certificates of Appreciations" for each translator can be prepared in advance and completed in Haiti.