

Access to Services with Interpreters: User Views

Joseph Rowntree Foundation

People who speak little English need interpreters in order to use health, legal, social welfare and education services. Most evaluations of interpreting provision have been conducted from a service provider perspective. An in-depth study by researchers from London South Bank University, Salford University and the LSE, examined the experiences of people who need interpreters. The research found that:

- People decide for themselves what level of English proficiency is necessary on particular occasions, and who is best able to meet their need for an interpreter. Sometimes they feel they can manage themselves, sometimes they seek help from a family member, friend or professional interpreter. Specialist help is seen as important in medical or legal matters.
- A good interpreter is regarded as someone who does more than change words into another language. People prefer proactive interpreters who can empathise with them, help with understanding procedures and plead their case. The personal character, attitude and trustworthiness of an interpreter are seen as crucially important.
- There is a lack of knowledge about who is a professional interpreter and how to get access to one. Even people who know how to access them often have difficulties in obtaining one.
- Experiences of professional interpreters are mixed. On the one hand users can value them for their knowledge of medical and legal systems, and can establish trust with an individual interpreter they get to know over time. On the other hand users are often critical of them, feeling that service providers control provision and that they have an uncaring attitude or are even actively against them.
- People most prefer family or friends to interpret for them. They trust them because they have an ongoing relationship with them that includes emotional commitment and loyalty.
- The researchers conclude that training in the basics of interpreting should be made more widely available to members of minority ethnic communities who regularly act as interpreters for family members or friends. Refocusing professional interpreting services to allow for a 'case load' approach, where feasible, would help to build the ongoing, trusting relationship between service user and interpreter that users want.

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