

# Working with patients when there are language barriers

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A guide to engaging interpreting services for primary care health professionals working in private practice.

**phn**  
BRISBANE NORTH

An Australian Government Initiative

# Working with an interpreter

## Why engage an interpreter?

For some patients, language can be a barrier to accessing health care. To ensure high-quality care for all patients regardless of their English language abilities, all staff should know how to work with an interpreter.

**Clinical benefits of working with an interpreter include:**

- more efficient and accurate diagnosis
- improved patient understanding
- improved patient adherence to management plans
- improved uptake of health promotion information
- fewer unnecessary tests and procedures
- increased patient satisfaction and safety.

This is consistent with the codes of conduct for health practitioners, including [Good medical practice: a code of conduct for doctors in Australia](#).

It is best practice to ask all new patients what their language preferences are. Record these in their file. If a patient does not speak English (and you do not speak their language fluently) it is recommended that you use a qualified interpreter.

Working with an interpreter assists you to meet your ethical and legal obligations related to duty of care for the patient, ensuring patient safety.

Some patients may speak conversational English, yet they may not understand a health consultation. Interpreters should be engaged in these situations.

A qualified interpreter is especially important when acquiring informed consent.

## Why can't a family member/friend interpret?

**Family members or friends should not be used to interpret because they:**

- may not have the required language competency
- may not understand complex health issues
- may lack impartiality
- are not bound by any code of conduct, whereas qualified interpreters are.

Similarly, your patient may not wish to disclose or discuss certain information in front of a family member or friend. Vital clinical information can be missed.

A family member or friend may help with simple day-to-day communication (such as booking an appointment) when the patient is happy with this.

## What is the Translating and Interpreting Service (TIS) National?

TIS National is an interpreting service provided by the Australian Government for people who do not speak English and for organisations that need to communicate with their non-English speaking clients.

**TIS National provides:**

- immediate phone interpreting
- pre-booked phone interpreting
- pre-booked video interpreting
- pre-booked on-site interpreting.

Phone interpreting is accessible 24 hours a day 7 days a week. For less common languages it is advisable to book ahead.

Availability of on-site interpreters can vary. Provide as much notice as possible to increase the likelihood of an interpreter being available.

## Free Interpreting Service (FIS)

**The following groups can access the [Free Interpreting Service](#) through TIS National:**

- **Medical practitioners:** (defined as General Practitioners, nurse practitioners, endorsed midwives, and approved medical specialists): when delivering Medicare-rebatable services in private practice. Nurses, reception and other practice support staff can also access the service when working with the registered medical practitioner.
- **Pharmacies:** to provide community pharmacy services.
- **Eligible allied health professionals:** when delivering Medicare-rebatable services in private practice within specific local government areas (LGAs).

Some PHNs also have free interpreting programs for other allied health professionals who are not currently eligible. Please contact your PHN.

## Priority Line

The Medical Practitioner and Pharmacy Priority Line provides priority access to TIS National, for private medical practitioners (and their support staff) and pharmacies. TIS National gives priority to this line over other callers in the queue. A phone interpreter will usually be provided within a few minutes for common community languages.

# Getting your organisation ready to engage TIS National

## Step 1: Register your organisation or clinician with TIS National

Access the online registration form here:

[tisonline.tisnational.gov.au/RegisterAgency](https://tisonline.tisnational.gov.au/RegisterAgency)

When you register choose to accept calls to your agency initiated by your non-English speaking patients.

Once registered, TIS National will email you your client code.

It is also possible to register over the phone the first time you use the service. The code will be provided for immediate use.

### Pharmacies

- Register as an organisation and all staff can use the one TIS National client code.

### Medical practitioners

- Individual medical practitioners must register for their own client code. Each medical practitioner needs a different client code for each practice that they work in. Nurses and practice support staff use the code for the medical practitioner they are working with.
- A Medicare provider number is required for the registration process.

### Allied health

- If [eligible](#), each allied health professional will need to register for their own unique client code.
- Allied health professionals may also be eligible to access funded interpreting when delivering National Disability Insurance Scheme (NDIS) or PHN commissioned mental health services. Separate client codes are needed in these instances. More information available [here](#).

## Step 2: Inform all staff of your TIS National client code/s

- Ensure all staff in your organisation understand how to use your specific code to book an interpreter.
- Ensure all relevant TIS National numbers and client codes are readily accessible by staff because they must quote a code whenever they use the service.
  - TIS National phone number 131 450
  - Medical Practitioner and Pharmacy Priority Line 1300 131 450 (for private medical practitioners (and their support staff) and pharmacies only).

Staff organising pre-booked phone, video and onsite interpreters will need to have access to the [TIS Online portal](#) password. Access is provided upon registration with TIS National.

When new clinicians start at the practice, it is necessary to register them with TIS National as part of their orientation process.

## Step 3: Provide your staff with training on how and when to work with interpreters

Training is available online. Contact us at [practicesupport@brisbanenorthphn.org.au](mailto:practicesupport@brisbanenorthphn.org.au).

Videos and information are available [here](#).

## Step 4: Make sure your patients know that when they are visiting your organisation, they can access an interpreter if required.

See next page for promotional resources.

# Ensure your organisation has the promotional resources they need



Clearly display the [National Interpreter Symbol](#) in your organisation so that patients know they can ask for language assistance.

TIS National promotional products can be printed or ordered online.

- [Promotional materials available](#)
- [Promotional materials order form](#)

Display [these posters](#) in your practice.



**When you need an interpreter, phone 131 450**

**Arabic**  
عندما تحتاجون إلى مترجم إنجليزي  
على الرقم 131 450

**Chinese**  
当您需要传译员时，请拨电话  
131 450

**Dari**  
وقتی به ترجمان نیاز دارید،  
به تلفون 131 450

**Farsi (alt Persian)**  
وقتی که به مترجم شماهی نیاز دارید،  
به شماره 131 450 تلفن کنید

**Greek**  
Όταν χρειάζεστε Βερμηνέα,  
καλέστε το 131 450

**Hazaragi**  
وختکه شومده به ترمیم نیازتون،  
شماره 131 450 زنگ زدنو کونید

**Italian**  
Quando hai bisogno di un  
interprete, telefona al 131 450

**Japanese**  
通訳が必要な場合は、  
131 450 に電話して  
ください

**Karen**  
မိန့်ပိုင်သည့်အခါတွင်၊  
အမှတ် 131 450 သို့  
တက်ပါ

**Korean**  
통역사가 필요하시면 131  
450 번으로 전화하세요

**Nepali**  
आपको आवश्यकता पर्नामा  
131 450 मा फोन  
गर्नुहोस्

**Pashto**  
کله چې تاسو ژوندلیک ته اړتیا  
لرئ، 131 450 شمېره ته زنگ  
وکړئ

**Russian**  
Когда вам требуется  
переводчик, позвоните по  
номеру 131 450

**Serbian**  
Kada vam treba prevodilac,  
javite se na 131 450

**Somali**  
Markaad u baahato  
turjumaan, ka wac 131 450

**Spanish**  
Cuando necesite un  
intérprete, llame al 131 450.

**Tamil**  
உங்களுக்கு ஒரு உதவிக்காரர்  
செய்யவேண்டியிருக்கும் போது,  
131 450  
எனது இலக்குஎனக்குள்ளேயே  
கொடுக்கப்படுகிறது

**Thai**  
เมื่อท่านต้องการการแปล  
โปรดโทรมาที่ 131 450

**Turkish**  
Bil tercimanı ihtiyacınız olduğunda,  
131 450 numarasına telefon açınız

**Vietnamese**  
Khi cần thông dịch viên, xin quý  
vị gọi điện thoại số 131 450

[www.tisnational.gov.au](http://www.tisnational.gov.au)  
24 HOURS A DAY, EVERY DAY OF THE YEAR

**Language card**

**English**  
Please indicate which language you speak, so that we can arrange an interpreter to help you communicate.

**Mandarin/普通话**  
请说明您说哪种语言，这样我们才能安排翻译帮助您沟通。

**Tamil/தமிழ்**  
தயவுசெய்து தங்களை உடைய மொழி எதுவென தெரிந்து தந்தால், நாம் உங்களுக்கு உதவும் வகையில் ஒரு மொழிபெயர்க்கும் சேவையைக் கொண்டுவர உதவுகிறோம்.

**Korean/한국어**  
어떤 언어를 사용하시는지 알려주세요. 그러면 저희가 귀하의 의사소통을 도와드릴 통역사를 추천할 수 있습니다.

**Cantonese/廣東話**  
請說明您所講的語言，以便我們安排口譯員協助您溝通。

**Spanish/Español**  
Por favor indique el idioma que usted habla, para organizar un intérprete que le ayudará a comunicarse.

**Turkish/Türkçe**  
Hangi dili konuştuğunuzu belirtin, böylece iletişimde bulunabilmeniz için size bir tercüman ayarlayabilelim.

**Myanmar Language (alt Burmese)/မြန်မာ**  
ကျွန်းုပ်ရှင် သို့မဟုတ် အသံအားထုတ်သည့်အခါတွင် မြန်မာစကားကို အသုံးပြုနိုင်ရန် အထောက်အကူပြုရန် နေရာပေးပါမည်။

**Greek/Ελληνικά**  
Παρακαλούμε αναφέρετε ποια γλώσσα ομιλείτε, ώστε να μπορέσουμε να κανονίσουμε ένα διερμηνέα να σας βοηθήσει να επικοινωνήσετε.

**Somali/Soomaali**  
Fadlan tilmaan luugadaad ku hadashid, si aan kuugu soo balamino turjumaan ka caawiya wada hadalka.

**Italian/Italiano**  
Sei pregato di indicare la lingua da te parlata, affinché si possa organizzare il servizio di un interprete che ti aiuti a comunicare.

**Nepali/नेपाली**  
कुनै भाषा बोल्नुहुन्छ जसको अनुवाद गर्न चाहनुहुन्छ, तसर्थ हामीले तपाईंलाई संग कुराकानी गर्न मद्दत गर्न सक्ने व्यक्तिहरूको व्यवस्था गर्न सक्नेछौं।



Have [this language card](#) available at reception and in clinical rooms so patients can point to their language and you can arrange an interpreter.

Once your patient's preferred language has been identified and recorded on their file, they can be given an ['I need an Interpreter'](#) card that they can keep and present in future and at other services.



**I need an interpreter**

I speak: \_\_\_\_\_

The bearer of this card requires the assistance of an interpreter.

# Tips for working with interpreters

## What kind of interpreter to engage?

### Immediate access to a phone interpreter:

Calling TIS National or the Medical Practitioner and Pharmacy Priority Line will connect you with an interpreter. The service has access to interpreters speaking over 150 different languages. You can do this before or during the consultation.

**Pre-booked interpreting:** Book an interpreter when the patient books the appointment. Pre-booking is especially important if the consultation may be complex or the availability of interpreters in a particular language is limited.

- **Pre-booked phone interpreting** can be useful if the matter is sensitive. You can request an interpreter from another state if necessary for privacy.
- **Pre-booked on-site interpreting** can be useful when the clinical concepts are complex and if specific documents need to be read, such as consent forms. On-site interpreting can be arranged for any location in Australia (subject to interpreter availability).
- **Pre-booked video interpreting** is available when engaging a phone or on-site interpreter would not be suitable.

**Note** that some patients may prefer a phone interpreter for confidentiality, or prefer a male or a female interpreter for cultural or personal reasons. Always ask each patient their preference before booking an interpreter and record it in their health record.

## General tips

1. Ensure you have provided enough time for the consultation because working with interpreters might require more time than normal. Remember, using interpreters will save time in the long run with fewer repeat visits for clarification or failure to adhere to care plans. Note: Time required to communicate effectively with the patient may be included when claiming time-tiered MBS items. [See MBS Online for more information.](#)
2. Introduce yourself to the interpreter and explain the nature of the consultation – your relationship with the interpreter is important.
3. Introduce the interpreter to the patient. Explain your role and that of the interpreter.

4. Face the patient and speak directly with them, rather than the interpreter. Say ‘How can I help you today?’ rather than ‘How can I help the patient today?’ You may wish to sit in a triangle formation.
5. Watch for body language clues and address any questions you may have about these to the patient.
6. Speak slowly and clearly, use short sentences and ask one question at a time.
7. Pause to allow time for interpreting.
8. Avoid using jargon, slang, idioms or proverbs.
9. Regularly check that the patient has understood what you have said. Use the [teach-back method](#).
10. Don’t have long private discussions with the interpreter in front of the patient. You can also interrupt any private discussion between the patient and the interpreter. If an interpreter needs to clarify something with the patient, they should inform you before doing so.
11. When establishing a patient’s history, be sensitive to the patient revealing personal information through an interpreter, particularly if the interpreter is a member of their community.
12. If the patient seems uncomfortable with a particular interpreter, assure them that an alternative interpreter can be requested.
13. At the end, summarise what has been discussed and check that the patient understands the next steps.
14. Consider the needs of the interpreter. They may have heard distressing information and may need to debrief with you after the consultation.

## Working with phone interpreters

- Use a speaker phone if possible.
- If a speaker phone is not available ensure the interpreter is aware that the handset will be passed between you and the patient. This will help ensure the message is not lost while passing the phone.
- Speak directly to the patient not the phone.

# Engaging interpreters: Tip sheet for receptionists

## Identify if a patient needs an interpreter

Find out each new patient's preferred language

Ensure the reception area has information encouraging people to request an interpreter as needed (page 3).

Use **Language card** to determine patient's preferred language



## Record these preferences in the patient's record

Add preferred language and note if an interpreter is needed.

Ensure this information is clearly available.

Provide: **'I need an interpreter'** card that the patient can keep and show next time



## If you need interpreting at reception

Call TIS National **131 450** or

Medical Practitioner & Pharmacy Priority Line **1300 131 450**

(for private medical practitioners (and their support staff) and pharmacies only).

Quote your practitioner's TIS National client code.

Refer to: 'Tips for working with interpreters' section (page 4)

## Book an appointment for the patient

Refer to: 'Tips for working with interpreters' section



## Make sure an interpreter is available for the consultation

The receptionist can either pre-book an interpreter (phone, on-site or video), or the clinician can seek a phone interpreter when the patient attends for their consultation.

**To pre-book:** Log in to the [TIS Online portal](#) and book an interpreter. You will receive a booking confirmation including appointment details.

Ensure the clinician is aware that an interpreter is booked and ensure that these details are documented in the patient's record.

If you have not pre-booked, make it clear to the clinician that they'll need to access an interpreter by phone during the consultation.



## After the consultation

Remember to organise a subsequent appointment before the patient leaves and the interpreter can assist to ensure that the patient is aware of the appointment details.

You can use the [Appointment Reminder Translation Tool](#)

# Engaging interpreters: Tip sheet for clinicians

Clinicians need to ensure that they have a protocol in place for their practice to support arranging an interpreter for any patients who require language support. This protocol should include arrangements for booking an appointment and for more urgent situations. The protocol usually requires involvement of administrative staff (as per previous section). However, it is always the clinician's responsibility to ensure they have these arrangements in place and that the language support is in place for their patient when required. Language support is not an optional extra.

While some patients speak conversational English well, they may not speak English well enough for a safe health consultation.

## If the interpreter is pre-booked

There will be a booking confirmation that includes the appointment details.

The interpreter may be on phone, video or on-site.

The confirmation has instructions to support access to the interpreter if it is a phone/video interpreter.

If an interpreter hasn't arrived when the appointment is about to start, contact TIS National.

## Identify if a patient needs an interpreter

It is usually possible to arrange a phone interpreter within a few minutes.

**Call TIS National: 131 450** or Medical Practitioner and **Pharmacy Priority Line: 1300 131 450**

(for private medical practitioners (and their support staff) and pharmacies only).

State your TIS National client code.

Keep all documentation related to interpreter use (including the reference number) for medico/legal reasons, even if the interpreter does not arrive.



## Brief the interpreter

Introduce yourself and let the interpreter know the nature of the discussion to be had.

See: Tips for 'working with interpreters' section (page 4).



## During your consultation

**Phone interpreter:** Use a speaker phone, if possible, and let the interpreter know

**On-site interpreter:** Face the patient and speak directly to the patient.

Consider a triangular formation with the interpreter.

Speak slowly and clearly, use short sentences and pause for the interpreting.

Use the teach-back method

See: Tips for working with interpreters section



## After your consultation

When referring your patient to another healthcare provider, remember to inform the provider that your patient will need an interpreter. Record this in your referral letter as well as providing the letter to the patient, to enable the new healthcare provider to have time to make the arrangements. Encourage your patient to request an interpreter when they make their appointment.

# More information

## TIS National Website

Go to [www.tisnational.gov.au](http://www.tisnational.gov.au) for a range of information about the service. See the 'Contact us' page for the most appropriate phone number to call.

## Free Interpreting Service information

[www.tisnational.gov.au/en/Free-Interpreting-Service](http://www.tisnational.gov.au/en/Free-Interpreting-Service)

## Translated information

You can support your consultation with health information that is in language for many health issues. Supporting your patient's health literacy can help to enhance their community's health literacy as well. Translated information is available at a number of sites which have been curated for health practitioners by

**Refugee Health Network Queensland:**  
[www.refugeehealthnetworkqld.org.au/forclinicians/translated-resources/](http://www.refugeehealthnetworkqld.org.au/forclinicians/translated-resources/)

## Refugee Health Resources

A range of clinical and general health information as well as educational information for health practitioners relevant to caring for people of refugee backgrounds is available at:

[www.refugeehealthnetworkqld.org.au](http://www.refugeehealthnetworkqld.org.au)

More information about health assessments and common health issues experienced by newly arrived refugees is available at:

[www.refugeehealthguide.org.au](http://www.refugeehealthguide.org.au)

## Appointment Reminder Translation Tool

[www.mhcs.health.nsw.gov.au/publications/appointment-reminder-translation-tool/create\\_an\\_appointment](http://www.mhcs.health.nsw.gov.au/publications/appointment-reminder-translation-tool/create_an_appointment)

## Brisbane North PHN website

<https://practicesupport.org.au/toolbox/multicultural-health>

## Contact your PHN

Brisbane South PHN:  
07 3864 7555

Brisbane North PHN:  
07 3630 7300

Darling Downs and West Moreton PHN:  
07 4615 0900

Gold Coast PHN:  
07 5635 2455



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