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Interdisciplinarity: Community Interpreting in the Medical Context

This chapter:

- Outlines the main issues surrounding interpreting in the medical setting.
- Highlights the importance of language in this setting and the need for interpreters to take this into account when deciding how to interpret.
- Discusses the different suggested roles of the interpreter in the medical setting.
- Analyses the consequences of such roles on the outcome of the medical events.

2.1 Introduction

Quote 2.1 Gentile et al.’s definition of Liaison Interpreting

Liaison interpreting is a profession where, like medicine, teaching and the law, the client’s welfare is usually affected directly. This is not only because most liaison interpreting takes place in the context of other professions such as medicine, teaching and the law, but also because interpreting has its own particular kinds of knowledge, skills and practices which require particular ethical considerations. Liaison interpreting is, then, subject to ethical considerations both along the lines of any other profession and along lines of its own. And because liaison interpreting takes place in the context of so many other professional institutional settings, ethical conflicts often arise for the interpreter.

(Gentile et al., 1996: 57)
Interpreters work with other professionals in the delivery of their services. There is often misunderstanding about each other’s tasks, roles, needs and expectations. Untrained interpreters may not understand the reasoning behind procedures, specific questions or mode of delivery in different settings, as well as the significance of the lay person’s responses in allowing the primary service providers to perform their duties adequately. On the other hand, professionals working with interpreters rarely understand the complexity of the task and the interpreter’s needs in producing an accurate rendition. Professional interpreters have a responsibility to acquire the necessary language and interpreting skills, to gain an understanding of the settings in which they work and their requirements, of the purposes for which language is used in each of these settings, and to abide by a code of ethics. However, few training opportunities exist, pay and working conditions are poor, and the lack of understanding of the interpreter’s role and others’ lack of appreciation of the task place pressures on interpreters which make it difficult for them to perform at a professional level. Even the best qualified and most competent professional interpreters will have difficulty interpreting accurately if they are not provided with adequate conditions. These relate to the provision of preparation material prior to the interpreting event, appropriate physical facilities, adequate breaks to avoid fatigue and the correct management of turns during the event. Confident interpreters can go a long way in asserting their needs to those who speak through them, by explaining the procedures of speaking through interpreters, controlling the length of the speakers’ turns, arranging the seating in the most effective way, asking for breaks when needed and requesting background information in order to prepare for the job. However, confidence comes with competence, status and a strong professional identity, and these characteristics are normally a natural consequence of pre-service compulsory university training (cf. Hale, 2005). Professionals who have had to acquire a university degree in order to practise tend not to treat the interpreter as an equal if the interpreter has not been educated at university level. Such a situation reinforces the perception that interpreting is an unskilled task that requires no training. This perception is also reflected in low pay and poor working conditions. Kuo and Fagan (1999), two medical practitioners, argue that in order to save on limited financial resources in medical settings in the United States, family and friends should be used as interpreters. They base their conclusion on a survey they conducted among patients and residents asking them to rate their level of satisfaction with family and friends acting as interpreters as compared to staff interpreters. Family