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Department of Family Medicine & Public Health

POLICY BRIEF

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Culture and Language Barriers in Healthcare: An Overview

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What is the issue?

Culture and language are two major barriers currently impacting immigrants and their search for healthcare. Patients will struggle with communicating what they are looking for and what their problems are, and they will not be receiving necessary information regarding certain services, care, and products. This miscommunication in healthcare can lead to life-threatening situations. The rising number of foreign patients means that communication errors between patients and healthcare practitioners when speaking a different language or with a different cultural background are increasingly likely[15]. Not only do these barriers restrict their access to healthcare, but they also restrict their ability to receive quality care, thus allowing them the become very vulnerable to worse health outcomes. There are currently a variety of resources that are aimed to assist immigrants[8], but there needs to be more resources aimed at eliminated these two barriers and creating a more immigrant-friendly healthcare system.

Who does this affect?

Immigrants currently make up 13.5 percent of the entire United States population, and 65.5 million Americans speak a language other than English at home[3]. Having the most diverse immigrant population in the world, the U.S. foreign-born population has reached approximately 44.4 million[20]. As seen in figure 1, this number is steadily increasing each year and is projected to reach 78 million in the next 50 years[20]. The U.S. Census Bureau has also recently discovered that over 65 million Americans 5 years old and older speak a language other than English at home[3]. All of these staggering amounts of immigrants within the U.S are identified as a part of the vulnerable population in terms of health outcomes, and language and cultural barriers contribute to the worse health outcomes due to events such as miscommunication, missed appointments, misdiagnosis of health conditions, and wrongly administered treatment[1]. These two major barriers cause greater health disparities and needs to be stopped. These barriers are

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extremely prevalent throughout today's society, but they are preventable.
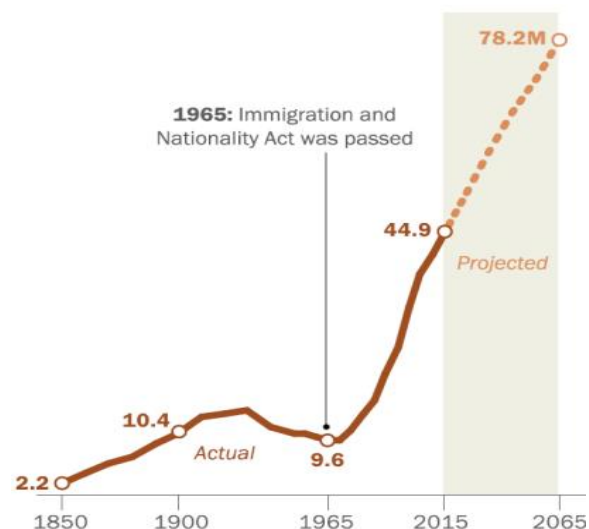
Figure 1. The U.S. immigrant population reached 45 million in 2015 and is projected to keep going and reach 78 million in 2065[20].

Why is this important?

Patients who are immigrants use a second language for healthcare encounters or count on the hospitals to have interpreters and the accuracy of the interpreters. As the immigrant population increases, more and more patients using the healthcare system do will not share a dominant language. These language barriers can lead to increased psychological stress and medically significant communication errors to patients who are already anxious[15]. Patients who share a dominant language are less vulnerable[4].

In addition to language, culture is also issue that causes barriers to equitable healthcare. It is essential to understand culture and how it plays a crucial role in how health is perceived and how healthcare is used. First of all, there are many differences between their home country's healthcare system and the United States healthcare system. The way healthcare professionals act, speak, and behave along with their body language is different. This affects the communication along with their thoughts and

actions regarding healthcare[23]. This also affects cultural inclusion as it increases anxiety of the situation due to fear of being stigmatized for trying to access healthcare[23]. Another culture barrier comes from healthcare's attempt at multiculturalism. Culturally competent health care is essential and there have been many attempts at achieving it. However, there are many challenges that resulted in "culturally competent care [that was] misguided or insufficient"[17]. Although there are correct intentions, there are notable shortcomings in policies and regulations in trying to achieve cultural competence.

Communicating exactly what you want to convey is essential when regarding the details of a diagnosis or treatment. People have to accurately describe the likelihood of the associated risk factors. Failure in doing so properly regarding language and culture can cause negative health outcomes. Miscommunications can lead to misunderstandings and patients might not understand severity and fail to comply with instructions, or they might not go for potentially life-saving treatment due to lack of comprehension. Studies prove that miscommunication occurs more frequently when healthcare professionals use an inadequately mastered second language and are unable to precisely communicate certain information without complete culture and language understanding. Culture shapes language and different cultures express things differently. For example, different cultures will describe pain differently. There are terms and expressions that are culture-specific and are difficult to translate the full meaning even when one understands the language. To make things worse, when interpreters are needed but not available at certain places, patients will have to rely on friends and relatives to translate. The friends and family are not medically experienced and will contribute to worse health outcomes. People may believe that

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these communication barriers are uncommon will not affect much of the U.S. immigrant population, however this is not true. As seen in figure 2, 57% of Hispanics alone have been reported to have already encountered a language or culture barrier in their lifetime[18].
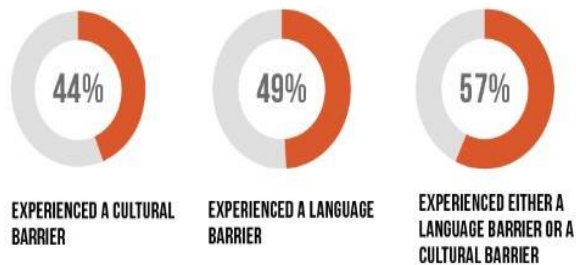
Figure 2. 57% of Hispanics aged 18+ have been reported to have experienced a language or culture barrier in the U.S. healthcare system[18].

What are the costs?

Language and cultural barriers often lead to miscommunication. These communication barriers cause patients to be three times more likely to encounter preventable problems than those without communication problems. That high rate of preventable problems leads to great costs. By reducing language and communication barriers, we could help achieve a reduction of 671,440 preventable cases and save over $6.8 billion annually[10]. Eradicating language and communication barriers is not only an ethical imperative, but it is also a financial imperative.

What are the current interventions?

Cultural Awareness Training

 Cultural Awareness is the understanding between oneself and other people from different countries or backgrounds. With cultural awareness in the healthcare setting, healthcare professionals would be required to think about their patients' culture and background to understand their interactions, words choice, and gestures[21]. This allows the professionals to provide what best suits the patient's needs, how to offer the best care

advice, while always showing respect for their beliefs and culture. Culture awareness training attempts to help healthcare professionals achieve a better understanding of many cultures in order to avoid conflicts regarding cultural differences. It can prevent conflicts that possibly lead to incidents of harassment and discrimination.

Cultural awareness training for health professionals is very successful and is now very common among a variety of hospitals and is still increasing in number[21]. This is because studies have shown cultural awareness training to positively impact social interactions between patients and healthcare professionals along with the quality of care for immigrant patients. Cultural competence is essential and benefits not only the patients, but also the organization and the community[11]. See figure 3 for all the social, health, and business benefits that come with achieving a culturally competent healthcare organization.

Professional Interpreter Services

Patients who use interpreter services reported more and higher quality preventative services, more office visits, and more prescriptions written and filled. The total estimated cost of providing interpreter services is $279 per year[13]. Providing interpreter services has many positive health outcomes and is financially viable, thus it is needed for enhancing health care coverage and quality to patients with limited English proficiency. It is extremely succesful, however, even though federal law requires it, nearly 1/3 of United States hospitals fail to offer interpreters[6]. Lack of medical interepreters means that a lot of information can be lost in translation[9]. This is not only refering to health costs, but it is also referring to financial costs. Language barriers can make healthcare not only inequitable but more expensive and dangerous[6]. Melody Shiaffino, epidemiologist at San Diego State University, emphasized how "if you don't know how to

speak the language, you don't know how to ask where it hurts"[9]. This was shown at her clinic as she witnessed a medical bill for an unnecessary ultrasound devastate a family. Interpreters are needed so they can serve to voice both sides of an interaction while also trying to account for cultural differences. Although medical interpreters are already in place, we need to ensure that all hospitals incorporate it.

A recent study in 2018 found that training to become a medical interpreter developed stronger relationships with patients and reported to feel more empathy towards the patients and wanted to advocate for them and find out how to best support them[25]. This shows how medical interpreters can be very beneficial not just for translations, but also for taking care of non-English speakers and ensuring optimal care. Interpreters are very important in healthcare. But we need to maintain a high overall quality of interpretation services in order to achieve these positive effects.

Language Translation Applications

Using professional interpreters is regarded as the gold standard. However, there are times when medical interpreters are unavailable or not needed for a variety of reasons and is often limited to specific aspects of care including diagnosis and consent[19]. With technology improving and impressive translation applications coming about, healthcare professions have been seen using such translation tools when lacking professional interpreters. Although the translations are a decent basic standard, it was not made for healthcare and does not consider cultural differences in language.

In 2019, there was a study that aimed to evaluate such translation apps to determine whether they were suitable for conversations in the healthcare setting. In the study, there were 15 applications assessed. Of these 15,

only 2 apps were rated as suitable for communication in the healthcare setting[19]. This shows that translation applications require caution and consideration before use in healthcare. Although some applications may be necessary in some cases, no application should replace medical interpreters.

Figure 4. Cultural differences vary greatly and cause miscommunication. These differences cannot be understood through translation applications.

## What are the next steps?

Diverse Healthcare Workforce

The United States healthcare system needs a more diverse health care workforce that represents those who they serve. This is essential in promoting understanding among patients and healthcare professionals, facilitating quality care, and promoting equity in the healthcare setting. In order to achieve this, there are four recommendations to consider.

1. Provide and expand outreach programs in order to encourage immigrants to enroll in medical and other health professional schools
2. Increase funding for programs and push for higher numbers of physicians and other healthcare professionals in minority communities.
3. Focus on educating minority students every educational level. This is essential

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to create larger pools of qualified minority applicants for medical school.
4. Medical schools can increase efforts to recruit minority faculty and leadership positions.

Minorities are currently heavily underrepresented among American health care workers. As seen in figure 4, even though African Americans, Hispanics, and Native Americans together are over ¼ of the nation's total population, the nation's population, they only make up 6% of the physicians[5]. Diversity in the healthcare system is linked to easier access to care for minorities, higher patient satisfaction, and strong cultural competence[5].
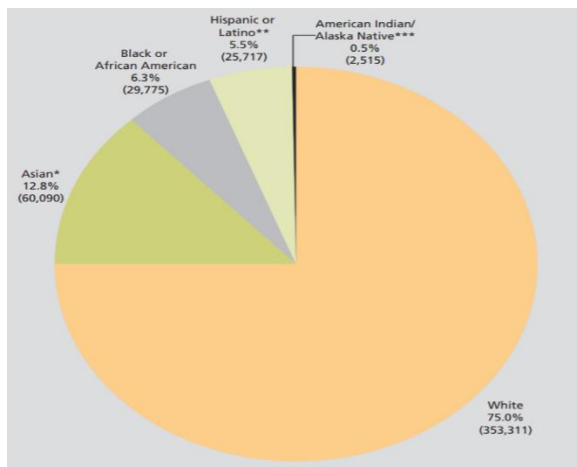
Figure 5. This pie chart represents U.S. MD Physicians by Race and Ethnicity. Minorities are underrepresented as "White" takes up 75% of the pie chart[5].

Health Education and Adaption

Although it is important for healthcare professionals to understand other peoples cultures, beliefs, and values, it is also important for immigrants to learn about the culture here in the United States and to adapt to it. Health education for immigrants will help them adapt with life in America and having programs that educate them in an appropriate and understandable way will lead to better health outcomes[24].

The problem is that language and culture barriers also affect immigrants' chances at obtaining health education. Immigrants often have difficulty adapting to the United States healthcare system due to the major differences it has compare to other countries. The United States healthcare system focuses on individual responsibility and self-care which is different from many other countries. This causes them to have less individual motivation to attend certain health education programs and self-care recommendations. Due to differing cultural traditions and healthcare systems, there can be many Western beliefs that other cultures believe to be useless[24]. For example, Chinese culture emphasizes the importance of chi and how an imbalance of chi leads to negative health outcomes. They also believe in the importance of herbs and other traditional medications that the Western cultures disregard. Many cultures also have stigmas regarding illnesses and diseases such as cancer and mental illnesses. Language barriers combined with these stigmas will prevent immigrants from getting treatment and support. We need to educate people because just education itself is enough to impact many conditions[24]. We need to help immigrants adapt to the Western culture and we need to educate them about the differences in culture and what they should do in order to obtain the best health outcomes for them and their families. To do this, there needs to be community programs that directly reach out to immigrant families. There needs to be more program interventions and more awareness spread throughout communities about the importance of health education.

Not Just Bilingual, Bicultural

Although speaking the language of immigrants is very important in understanding them, it is not enough. Healthcare professionals need to understand their cultural backgrounds and their values and beliefs[26]. Even when people

speak the same language, they may not pick up certain cultural cues that indicate a different perspective. There are many times when it can be hard to accept changes in behavior or care even if it is told to be "for the better" because it simply holds a cultural significance that the individual is not yet ready to abandon. Healthcare professionals must be willing to learn and understand the various cultures that their patients can come from. They must be willing to compromise in order to make their patients more comfortable and in order to give them the optimal healthcare experience. They should understand their patients to the fullest so they can also respect their culture and personal values. In order to fight this cultural barrier, both healthcare professionals and the patients themselves must be willing to learn about each other and their cultures so they can build respect between each other and communicate exactly what they mean without miscommunications in order to have the optimal healthcare experience. If this happens in the future, which it eventually will, immigrant patients will have a much better healthcare experience that will improve their health outcomes. Culture encompasses so much of our lives and cannot be understood purely through a shared language.

Social Benefits	Health Benefits	Business Benefits
• Increases mutual respect and understanding between patient and organization • Increases trust • Promotes inclusion of all community members • Increases community participation and involvement in health issues • Assists patients and families in their care • Promotes patient and family responsibilities for health	• Improves patient data collection • Increases preventive care by patients • Reduces care disparities in the patient population • Increases cost savings from a reduction in medical errors, number of treatments and legal costs • Reduces the number of missed medical visits	• Incorporates different perspectives, ideas and strategies into the decision-making process • Decreases barriers that slow progress • Moves toward meeting legal and regulatory guidelines • Improves efficiency of care services • Increases the market share of the organization

A culturally competent healthcare organization leads to benefits for patients, communities, and the organizations themselves.

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