

Compassionate conversations

A guide to using an interpreter in virtual communication

Increasingly, important conversations with patients and their families are being conducted virtually. These conversations can be more complex when an interpreter is required. This guide provides tips for conducting compassionate conversations via virtual mediums (e.g. phone, video call) with the aid of an interpreter.

Before the conversation

- **Plan ahead** to use a professional interpreter wherever possible. While it is tempting to use a family member or friend, this is inappropriate: family and friends are emotionally involved, and their language ability may be inadequate
- Consider **language and cultural requirements** (e.g. dialect, accent, ethnicity and religion). Interpreters are not cultural experts or brokers
- Consider **gender preference**
- **Brief the interpreter** about the context and aim of the conversation (e.g. informing about a death; decision-making regarding intensive care unit admission; specialist palliative care referral)
- **Confirm the interpreter understands** the medical language, diagnosis and prognosis; allow time for questions, clarifying terminology
- Be aware many concepts have **no linguistic or conceptual equivalent** in other languages
- Confirm the interpreter is **not personally known** to the family – many culturally and linguistically diverse communities are small

During the conversation

Introduction:

- State the call will be **confidential** – the person may fear that exchanges will be shared within their community

Communication:

- **Avoid jargon, metaphors and euphemisms** – such phrases are unlikely to have a direct translation
- Speak **directly to the person** rather than the interpreter: *“Is there someone there with you currently or can we call another person to support you in this conversation?”* instead of *“Can you ask if they are there by themselves or if there is someone else who can support them?”*
- **Pause** after two or three sentences to allow the interpreter to speak
- **Encourage clarification** by the interpreter if uncertain about anything
- Be mindful of **no visual cues** (e.g. body language) to assist in interpreting
- If the person does not understand, it is your responsibility (not the interpreter’s) to **explain more simply**
- Maintain your role in **leading** the conversation – the interpreter will not conduct the session

Close:

- If arranging a follow up conversation, use the **same interpreter** if possible
- Clearly **indicate when the conversation has ended** to everyone involved in the call: *“End of call”*

After the conversation

- **Debrief** with the interpreter and **provide support** if required – these conversations can be challenging for interpreters
- **Report** any concerns or compliments regarding the interpreter to their agency