**How to ... work with interpreters**

**Introduction**

In an increasingly multicultural society, in some social work contexts, it may be necessary to work alongside interpreters in order to ensure that communication is effectively received and conveyed. In addition, sourcing and working with interpreters reflects a value position which respects diversity and the first language skills of the service user/s. The ultimate aim is to work with people with the appropriate language and translation skills, but it is also of critical importance to try to ensure that the interpreter has cultural and professional knowledge (Lishman, 2009). This is true whether the interpreter has a different language (a European, African or Asian language for example) or communicates using British Sign Language. The level of professional and cultural knowledge is particularly important as using an interpreter can be a barrier to effective communication and ultimately the interpreters experience and knowledge will affect the efficacy of the interview.

**Why may an interpreter be necessary?**

The choice to utilise the goodwill of a friend, family member or neighbour to translate information when your language is different to that of the individual or family that you are working with may be convenient and readily accessible. However, this should not happen. Moreover, there are dangers of using unofficial/informal interpreters. These include:

* translations that include inaccuracies, bias or distortion;
* missing information;
* lack of confidentiality;
* failure of the interpreter to understand their role;
* difficulties in the interpreter conveying sensitive or subtle information;
* embarrassment or tensions when discussing taboo subjects;
* the interpreter’s perspective being conveyed rather than the family’s or social workers’ (Shackman, 1985: Lishman, 2009).

Using a professional interpreter avoids the potential for over-identification and the possibility of the existing relationship with the service user impacting on the translation task. Thus, an interpreter should offer a professional service with confidentiality, sensitivity, honesty and diligence.

**Top tips for working with interpreters**

Moss (2012) and Birkenmaier et al. (2014) offer the following good practice principles to be considered when working with interpreters:

* clarify the purpose and focus of the interview and ensure that the interpreter understands this in order to provide a full and literal translation;
* ensure that the interpreter and the service user/s speak the same language and/or dialect;
* ensure that the service user(s) is happy with the interpreter in order that they are content that the interpreter will convey their views and opinions honestly and accurately;
* use clear and simple language (avoid jargon and technical language);
* listen to the interpreter and service user – both maintain and observe eye contact and other non-verbal communication;
* regularly check that the service user(s) understand the conversation;
* work with interpreters who are empathic, trustworthy and maintain confidentiality;
* work with interpreters who demonstrate a strong commitment to ethical practice – ensure that they understand key terms and relevant concepts;
* stay attuned to listening and attending to both interpreter and service user(s).

**References**

Birkenmaier, J., Berg-Weger, M and Dewees, M.P. (2014) *The Practice of Generalist Social Work* (3rd edn). New York: Routledge.

Lishman,J. (2009) *Communication in Social Work* (2nd edn). Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.

Moss, B. (2012) *Communication Skills and Health and Social Care* (2nd edn). London: Sage.

Shackman, J. (1985) *A Handbook on Working with Employing and Training Interpreters*. Cambridge: National Extension College.

Originally produced for *Developing Skills for Social Wok Practice* by Rogers et al. © 2017.