

A retrospective qualitative analysis of the dynamic experiences faced by youth serving as interpreters for family members in medical settings

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Background

- Over 25 million people in the U.S. have limited English proficiency (LEP), often leading children to serve as interpreters for their parents.¹
- Existing studies have focused on healthcare providers' perspectives,² parent-child dynamics,³ and translation accuracy,⁴ often overlooking the child's experiences, challenges, and emotional stress.
- Having children interpret for parents is often more convenient than arranging for professional translation services or utilizing a formal interpretation system.

Objective

To explore the diverse experiences of young adults who, as children, interpreted for family members in healthcare settings and examine how these experiences impacted their emotional well-being and family dynamics.

Methods

- Qualtrics Screening Survey Eligibility Criteria
 - 18 years or older
 - interpreted for a family member in a medical setting as a child at least once
- We conducted 10 remote (Zoom and phone call) semi-structured interviews from 4/30-5/5/25, each averaging around 30 minutes.
- The method used was a qualitative inductive analysis based on grounded theory of these semi-structured interviews.⁵

Results

Major Themes

Navigating Conflicting Roles

Participants struggled to balance their roles of a family member and as an unofficial member of the care team, finding it difficult to remain unbiased while offering emotional support. They often did not have space to process their own emotions.

"...I'm your daughter. I don't want you to die... When you're having to translate it's your first time hearing what's going on with your loved one too... It would be nicer to have someone there to translate...I have to understand what's going on first, I have to process it, deal with it, and then have to share it with them, and it kind of creates this uncomfortable atmosphere where especially for me, you want to cry, but you're like nope, let's get the job done." - Participant 3

Worry of Misinterpretation

The fear and stress of interpreting incorrectly or not thoroughly leading to possible confusion and negative health outcomes.

"I always did have that thought that they would misinterpret...and it would lead to miscommunication, misinterpretation, and misinformation." -Participant 7

Confidence Through Experience and Language Growth

Participants gained confidence in interpreting over time through repeated experience and improved language skills, including familiarity with medical terms.

"This is actually really good practice because it kind of forced me to use my second language in a critical way... I felt like it was a good challenge and I did enjoy that aspect...that's a huge positive..." - Participant 1

Participants Found Themselves in this Role Due to Unreliable Interpretation Services

Interpretation services are not consistently available, delayed when offered, and can vary significantly in quality. Participants often felt that they needed to step up to interpret instead of waiting for medical staff to find an interpreter.

"...we need to see who's available. Sometimes it takes forever. They come back like an hour later and they're like, oh, we couldn't find anybody..." - Participant 10

Coding and Analysis

- 76 codes
- 4 themes

Table 1: Demographics of study population.

	N=10	Percentage
Gender		
Male	2	20%
Female	8	80%
Race/Ethnicity		
Hispanic/Latino	5	50%
East Asian	4	40%
South-East Asian	1	10%
Language Interpreted		
Spanish	5	50%
Mandarin and/or Cantonese	4	40%
Vietnamese	1	10%

*Mean age is 22 years old (range 18 - 26)

Conclusion

- Children experienced emotional burden from navigating conflicting roles and balancing neutrality with family support, along with fear of misinterpretation and a lack of preparation or training.
- Inconsistent interpretation services left participants unprepared, leading to stress and emotional suppression.
- The responsibility to interpret most frequently fell on older siblings and those with culturally driven responsibilities.
- Over time, participants gained confidence, enhanced their language proficiency, and felt a strong sense of pride assisting their families.
- This role, though often empowering, carries significant emotional and logistical burdens.

Policy Implications

Fund culturally competent and digital interpreter services to reduce youth translation burdens and errors, and train providers to respectfully navigate and support family interpretation preferences in LEP communities.

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Qualtrics Survey



Interview Questions



References