

*The National Council on Interpreting in Health Care
Working Papers Series*



***A NATIONAL CODE OF ETHICS FOR
INTERPRETERS IN HEALTH CARE***

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Code of Ethics for Interpreters in Health Care

- ☐ **The interpreter treats as confidential, within the treating team, all information learned in the performance of their professional duties, while observing relevant requirements regarding disclosure.**
- ☐ **The interpreter strives to render the message accurately, conveying the content and spirit of the original message, taking into consideration its cultural context.**
- ☐ **The interpreter strives to maintain impartiality and refrains from counseling, advising or projecting personal biases or beliefs.**
- ☐ **The interpreter maintains the boundaries of the professional role, refraining from personal involvement.**
- ☐ **The interpreter continuously strives to develop awareness of his/her own and other (including biomedical) cultures encountered in the performance of their professional duties.**
- ☐ **The interpreter treats all parties with respect.**
- ☐ **When the patient's health, well-being, or dignity is at risk, the interpreter may be justified in acting as an advocate. Advocacy is understood as an action taken on behalf of an individual that goes beyond facilitating communication, with the intention of supporting good health outcomes. Advocacy must only be undertaken after careful and thoughtful analysis of the situation and if other less intrusive actions have not resolved the problem.**
- ☐ **The interpreter strives to continually further his/her knowledge and skills.**
- ☐ **The interpreter must at all times act in a professional and ethical manner.**

The Core Values of the Code of Ethics for Health Care Interpreters

The National Code of Ethics for Health Care Interpreters is grounded on three core values: beneficence, fidelity¹ and respect for the importance of culture. These core values form an overarching set of ideals that infuse the work of the health care interpreter and embody what interpreters care about in their relationships with the patient and the provider.

1. Beneficence

A central value of the health care interpreting profession is the health and well-being of the patient. This is a core value that is shared with other health care professions. It means that the members of these professions have as their essential obligation and duty to support the health and well-being of the patient and her/his family system of supports (e.g., family and community) and to do no harm.

2. Fidelity

The essence of the interpreter role is encapsulated in the value of fidelity. The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language describes fidelity as involving “the unflinching fulfillment of one’s duties and obligations and the keeping of one’s word or vows. In a related nonpersonal sense, it refers to faithfulness to an original . . .” This description accurately describes the quality of the interpreters’ work and the attitude with which interpreters should approach their work. In adhering to the essential function of their role, interpreters make what amounts to a vow to remain faithful to the original message as they convert utterances from one language into another without adding to, omitting from, or distorting the original message.

3. Respect for the importance of culture and cultural differences

Culture frames the way we interpret the world, our experiences in it, and our relationship to ourselves and others. In the area of health, culture influences the meaning given to symptoms, the diagnosis of those symptoms, the expectations regarding the course of the related disease or illness, the desirability and efficacy of treatments or remedies, and the prognosis. Language and culture are closely intertwined. Linguists such as Sapir (1956) and Whorf (1978) have pointed out how language serves as an expression of the ways that a culture organizes reality.

The health care interpreter has a twofold task in upholding their respect for the influence of culture and cultural differences as they perform their essential duty of converting messages from one language into another.

First, the interpreter “. . . has the task not only of knowing the words that are being used but of understanding the underlying, culturally based propositions that give them meaning in the context in which they are spoken.” (MMIA and EDC, 1996) Without

¹ I would like to acknowledge Marjorie Clay, Ph.D., ethicist at University of Massachusetts Memorial Medical Center, who called to my attention the core values of beneficence and fidelity in relation to the work of the health care interpreter.

understanding that the cultural frame of reference of the speaker is an integral part of the meaning system of that speaker, an interpreter may focus only on the surface meaning of words and miss the essential message that the speaker is trying to convey. Second, the interpreter has the task of always being aware that cultural differences in perspectives and alternative views of the world can lead to critical misunderstandings and miscommunication.

This value is one that should be shared with other health care providers. Currently, there are more and more initiatives in health care facilities and educational programs for health care professionals that include cultural competence as an essential skill. However, until such time as all health care professionals are fully prepared to address cultural differences in their practice, it falls upon the health care interpreter to be cognizant of and able to alert both the patient and the provider to the impact of culture in the health care encounter.