Sign language interpreters

What is a sign language interpreter?

A sign language interpreter enables communication to take place between deaf and hearing people who do not share the same language.

The interpreter does not simply convey utterances word for sign, or sign for word. The interpreter conveys the meaning, intent and emotion of the message.

An interpreter must possess a solid understanding of both the deaf and hearing language and culture, and be familiar with the subject being discussed.

Interpreters do not add their own opinion or delete any part of the message and will interpret everything spoken in the room.

They will also interpret any sounds that take place within hearing distance, such as a baby crying in a waiting room, mobile phones ringing, a siren outside or people talking in a nearby room.

Why use a professional interpreter?

Professional interpreters are accredited by the National Accreditation Authority of Translators and Interpreters (NAATI). Accreditation requires proven linguistic and cultural expertise and the ability to make sound ethical decisions.

Always use an accredited interpreter to safeguard the integrity and legal rights of both parties. You may be at risk of breaching anti-discrimination legislation by using unaccredited interpreters.

Family members and friends are not usually accredited interpreters and should not be used as interpreters in professional settings due to lack of competence, bias or personal interest which may compromise the interpretation process.

Only consider using family members or unaccredited interpreters in emergencies after all possible avenues of engaging an appropriately accredited interpreter have been exhausted.

Strategies for working with sign language interpreters

Interpreters and clinicians require a close working relationship to enhance therapeutic outcomes.

The following strategies for working with sign language interpreters have been recommended by the Australian Sign Language Interpreters’ Association (ASLIA), the peak body representing sign language interpreters in Australia.

- Meet with the interpreter beforehand to clarify any unique vocabulary, technical terms, acronyms, jargon, seating arrangements, lighting and other needs, and provide any written materials.
- Reserve seats for the interpreter and deaf participants—deaf participants may still choose to sit elsewhere to ensure they have a clear view of the speaker and interpreter.
- Consider using a circle or semi-circle seating arrangement in small group discussions instead of a theatre style arrangement.
- Provide good lighting so the interpreter can be seen, even if lights will be turned off or dimmed for a presentation.
- Talk and respond directly to the deaf person and maintain eye contact with them—avoid directing comments to the interpreter, such as “Tell him ...” or “Ask her ...”
- Speak naturally and at your normal pace—interpreters will ask you to slow down or repeat if necessary.
- Avoid private conversations—everything will be interpreted. Do not ask the interpreter to censor any portion of the conversation.
- One person should speak at a time—encourage the group to follow this rule.
- If you are facilitating a group discussion, be aware that the interpreter will be several seconds behind—pause before recognising the next speaker to allow the interpreter to finish with the current speaker.
- Provide a short break every hour—interpreting is mentally and physically taxing. Do not expect the interpreter to interpret during these breaks.

How to contact a professional interpreter

If you need to use a sign language interpreter contact the Deafness and Mental Health Service on (07) 3167 8430 or email deafness_mhs@health.qld.gov.au to help you find and book an interpreter for your needs.

For more information
