

Telehealth Wasn't Designed for Non-English Speakers

In the US, it's already harder for them to access care

By Nicole Wetsman, Jun 4, 2020

Navigating the health care system is challenging enough if you don't speak English. Walking into a clinic can cause more anxiety if the person at the desk struggles to understand you, for example. If your doctor doesn't speak your language, they're legally required to provide an interpreter, but many try to squeeze by without them — which could lead to miscommunication about the dose of a medication you need to take or put you in more danger of a bad outcome. The barriers pile up: doctor's notes in English, an inaccessible prescription refill system, a wheelchair company can't call to give you a delivery date. The pandemic sets up additional roadblocks. As COVID-19 spread across the US, doctors suddenly changed how they practiced medicine. Many canceled in-person visits and told patients they'd switched to telemedicine — a fragmented umbrella term that includes everything from text messaging to an integrated video chat.

Some of Elaine Khoong's patients at Zuckerberg San Francisco General Hospital didn't get the message. At the start of the pandemic, the policies and practices were changing every day, Khoong, a general internist and assistant professor of medicine also affiliated with the University of California at San Francisco (UCSF), told *The Verge*. "All this was communicated to our patients, but it was really only being communicated in English," she says. Automated texts to remind patients of their visits were updated to say that the appointment would be by phone, but those were initially only in English and Spanish.

Many of Khoong's patients speak Chinese and responded to the text messages saying that they wanted to cancel their appointment because they didn't want to come into the office out of fear of COVID-19. "They didn't realize it was a reminder about a telephone visit, rather than an in-person visit," she says. For her patients, telemedicine means phone calls. Leveling up to video calls requires extra infrastructure (webcams, computers, software) for both patients and doctors, and some degree of tech savvy. Even with a computer and internet access, it takes a lot of steps to download and use a new app — and it's even harder if the instructions are in a language the user doesn't speak.

"A lot of the technology, the applications themselves, are not in other languages. So just getting access to talk to a provider requires additional language support from a family member, or additional coaching from the provider," says Carolina Valle, policy manager at the California Pan-Ethnic Health Network, an organization that works to reduce health disparities.

Video visits may be better for patients, Rodriguez says, because doctors can actually see their patients and get a

sense of their environment. Relying on phone calls because video systems aren't accessible shouldn't be a long-term solution. "Saying, well, we can't figure out the technology piece, so let's just do let's just do audio — I don't think that's good enough," he says.

For limited English speakers, figuring out the tech on the patient end is just the first step. Once a patient gets set up on a Zoom call at UCSF, Khoong has to turn to the next logistical challenge: integrating a medical interpreter onto that call who is trained to serve as the linguistic go-between for the visit. To make it happen, she has to call the interpreter on her personal phone and conference them into the Zoom line. Then, she has to rename that caller so that the patient doesn't see her phone number.

Interpreting for a doctor's visit requires more than just a passing grasp of another language — medical interpreters are specially trained in medical terminology and patient privacy, and cultural awareness. When they're part of a visit, limited-English proficient patients have fewer communication errors, better outcomes, and shorter hospital stays.

Getting an interpreter looped into a doctor's appointment is already hard for non-English-speaking patients, even though health care systems are legally required to provide qualified medical interpreters to patients. Around one-third of hospitals don't provide interpreters for patients who need them, one 2016 analysis found. The challenges are only exacerbated by the shift to telehealth.

In theory, it should be easier to loop an interpreter into a telehealth visit. For a virtual visit, doctors don't have to go through the logistical steps of getting an extra person into a room (if they have interpreters on staff) or fumble with an iPad or phone while they're examining a patient (if they rely on remote interpreting services). In reality, though, there aren't seamless ways to add a third person to video calls. At UCSF, some interpreters are on the hospital staff; they're a bit easier to integrate because they're also using Zoom. Others, though, are contracted through remote interpreting services, which usually provide interpreters over a phone line or unique video app. The company's video platforms aren't easy to patch through to something like Zoom. "It's completely different," Khoong says.

"Digital health is a great thing. But we haven't been as good or intentional in thinking about how it works in different populations," Casillas says. "The limited English speaking population isn't a small group. And we've left them out."

Source: https://www.theverge.com/21277936/telehealth-english-systems-disparities-interpreters-online-doctor-appointments?mc_cid=150c061565&mc_eid=0e8ae9c9ca



July 2020 Calendar

National Black Family Month
National Minority Mental Health
Awareness Month

- 4 – Independence Day (US)
- 5 – Asalha Puja Day (Buddhist)
- 15 – World Youth Skills Day
- 15-18 – National Cancer Survivor Sibling Month
- 18 – Nelson Mandela International Day
- 23 – National Intern Day (US)
- 24 – Pioneer Day (Mormon Christian)
- 25 – St. James Day (Western Christian)
- 26 – Americans with Disabilities Day (US)
- 28 – World Hepatitis Day
- 30 – Tish'a B'av (Judaism)
- 31 – Eid al Adha (Islam)

