

## Using Kids as Interpreters

Leland Y. Yee, assistant speaker pro tem of the state Assembly. Tuesday, April 8, 2003

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The story is sad but true: A young student is called out of class to tell her Cantonese-speaking mother that she has cancer. At the hospital, her mother's doctor asks the daughter to explain that the growth they just found turned out to be a malignant tumor requiring months of radiation and painful surgeries. The young girl had to hold in her own shock and grief to find the words in her native tongue to tell her mother she could die. Not knowing the words for "surgery" or "chemotherapy," she told her mother that the doctors would cut into her body. The mother took out her anger on the first person to give her the painful news: her daughter.

Our children are being abused, frequently and as a matter of convenience, as interpreters for non-English-speaking adults when the grown-up seeks to use government or community services. Kids are being abused when the non-English speaking adults they accompany go to state agencies, community-based organizations, hospitals or clinics for services. Children should not be the language brokers in these situations. It is damaging to them, and it is dangerous for the adults. A child should not be the person telling a police officer how dad hit mom. A child should not be the first to learn of a father's serious illness from a doctor, nor should the child be the person to have to tell the father. Children do not have enough command of the language to communicate critical or complex information correctly. They are often too ashamed or embarrassed to communicate sensitive information.

Medical interviews are even more problematic. The use of an untrained interpreter, and particularly the use of a child who may not even have basic knowledge about parts of the body, diseases or symptoms, can have dire consequences. Studies have shown that the use of an untrained interpreter results in misdiagnosis, incorrect medication and life-threatening situations. The federal government made clear in the Civil Rights Act of 1964 that the lack of interpretation access is discrimination. California requires state agencies to provide information and services for non-English speakers and the State Health and Safety Code places stringent interpretation requirements on general and acute-care hospitals. Both federal and state guidelines acknowledge the difficulties and negative consequences of using children as interpreters. So what should be done? The state should be hiring more bilingual staff to ensure that the ethnic groups in our communities are adequately served. Too often our government offices barely begin to reflect the diversity of the population they serve.

Other interpretation sources are also available. Some community groups have created their own interpretation networks, including bilingual staff members, contractors hired specifically as interpreters and translators, and access to a telephone-based interpretation service. The California Medical Association, which represents doctors, is creating a group of volunteers to assist with medical interpretation. Hospitals have been at the forefront of using new technology to move to better interpretation services. At Highland Hospital in Oakland, a medical videoconferencing system is being installed to link interpreters via video cameras and computer monitors to a series of primary sites in the hospital.

Medical interpreters will be able to see the patient and doctor, thereby improving access to more effective interpretation. But however well or poorly our agencies and institutions provide interpretation services for their clientele, there is no excuse for using children. I have introduced legislation, AB292 that bans the use of children as interpreters by any state department or agency, or by any organization receiving state funding. Children could still interpret in casual conversation, or in emergency situations. AB292 does not prohibit the use of a family member as interpreter if a non-English speaker wishes, providing that person is at least 18 years old and thus likely to be able to handle the situation.

Protecting children from abuse means taking them out of the translation loop.