Clinical Spanish Proficiency Among Internal Medicine Residents: Identifying Educational Needs

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Aim: Describe the Spanish language communication needs of patients, ascertain the Spanish language proficiency of their resident providers, and characterize the landscape of current language communication practices.

Introduction
• As the population of Spanish-speaking patients continues to grow in the US, ongoing work is needed to address the linguistic barriers that contribute to disparities in healthcare.
• Language concordance between patients and providers associates with increased patient satisfaction and understanding of their care; therefore, more Spanish-speaking physicians are needed to bridge this communication gap.
• As language acquisition occurs longitudinally, residency training affords a unique opportunity for structured education to advance language skills.
• Limited data exist on Spanish language skills and acquisition amongst residents and whether resident providers adhere to best language communication practices.

Methods
• We distributed an electronic survey to 167 Internal Medicine and 16 Medicine/Pediatrics residents.
• We queried the electronic medical record and reviewed institutional demographic data to categorize patients’ primary language spoken at our major clinical training sites.
• Descriptive statistics performed using Microsoft Excel.
• This study qualified as exempt from IRB review.

Results

Residents' self-assessed Spanish proficiency level

- None
- Some, less than conversational
- Conversational
- Clinically proficient
- Fluent

Less than half of residents who self-assess as proficient or fluent have completed a proficiency examination

- No
- Yes

Residents who self-assess to lack proficiency report not regularly using an interpreter while pre-rounding

- Never
- Rarely
- Sometimes
- Often
- Always

Narrative analysis: barriers to achieving proficiency
• “There will always be cultural nuances lost, that only time and practice and exposure will help with”
• “Consistent use/practice opportunities.”
• “Feeling like the practice I need to improve gives my patients substandard care”
• “Not having any immersive experience that forced me to use Spanish regularly hence losing a lot of vocabulary and grammar skills”

Discussion
• Although many residents report prior Spanish language training, few assess they have achieved clinical proficiency or fluency.
• Despite this, residents with inadequate language proficiency communicate without the use of a professional interpreter.
• For those who do self-assess as proficient, only half have completed a hospital required proficiency exam.
• More robust opportunities for Spanish language education, proficiency assessment, and education on appropriate use of medical interpreters are needed.

Of patients at our primary teaching sites (varies by hospital and clinic) report Spanish as their primary language

- None: 1% - 33%
- Some, less than conversational: 84%
- Conversational: 89%
- Clinically proficient: 89%
- Fluent: 89%