

Learning in Linguistically-Diverse GP placements

Practicing medicine in the midst of cultural and linguistic diversity is a reality in Western Sydney where 45% of residents speak a language other than English at home. The top ten languages spoken included Arabic, Vietnamese, Hindi, Mandarin, Cantonese, Tagalog and Spanish. Many of these patients prefer to consult GPs who speak their languages. While it can be challenging to learn in a GP setting where the consultation is conducted in a language other than English (LOTE), this affords a rich opportunity to learn about cultural and linguistic aspects of practicing medicine in a global context, as you will likely be managing patients who speak different languages in whatever part of the world you will practice in the future. The following are some helpful strategies you could discuss with your GP supervisor, based on research conducted at Western Sydney University and further insights from WSU students, GP academics and supervisors.

Learning before the LOTE consultation

Ask the GP about the predominant culture seen at the practice. What are common health problems they have? Are there cultural norms you should be aware of when interacting with patients from this cultural group (eg. body language, mannerisms, role of family members)? What is the health system like in their country of origin? How does this affect their expectations of seeing a GP in Australia? How might culture and historical events (e.g. civil war, political instability) affect their health-seeking behaviour and management of medical problems?

Learn some key phrases in that language (eg. “hello”, “my name is”, “I’m a medical student”). This is a great way of developing rapport. The GP may be willing to teach you some phrases, or you could download an app such as Duolingo to learn on your own. Don’t be afraid to mispronounce or make a language mistake – most patients will appreciate the respect you are showing by learning something about their language and culture. These phrases may come in useful when you are a junior doctor seeing patients who speak these languages.

Learning during the LOTE consultation

The GP supervisor will usually summarise issues raised by the patient for you – either during or after the consultation. Establish with the GP when is the best time to ask questions, and when to ask them to explain to you what is being discussed should the GP forget or is feeling rushed.

Take the opportunity to observe the non-verbal communication used by the patient, family members and the GP. How does the GP develop rapport and express empathy and understanding? What gestures and facial expressions does the patient use to describe their reasons for presentation?

Reflect on what it might be like for a non-English speaking patient to attend a health professional who doesn’t speak their language.

Some GPs may ask you to type in the notes, dictating in English what to write as a way of interpreting for you, and saving them time. Alternatively, other GPs may position your chair so you can read what they are typing as the consultation progresses.

Ask the GP whether it would be appropriate to use a speech-to-text translation app (e.g. Google Translate), so you can follow the consultation on your mobile phone, if the patient consents.

The GP may use a telephone interpreter or a lay interpreter if they don't speak the patient's language either. What can you learn about communicating via an interpreter and what are the pros and cons of using these different types of interpreters? How does this compare with using a professional hospital interpreter?

Ask whether it would be possible for you to take some of the history or perform part of the physical examination with the GP interpreting for you.

Look for ways to helpfully participate in the consultation (eg. offer to check their BP, BMI, waist circumference; phone for test results or for a specialist appointment; tidy the examination couch after the patient has left).

Ask the GP to show you how to perform some common procedures so you can help out next time (e.g. pregnancy tests, ECGs, spirometry, injections).

Learning after the LOTE consultation

Take short notes of each consultation so you can ask the GP any pending questions you had (e.g. the clinical reasoning process, the conditions managed, the management agreed upon) at lunchtime, at the end of the day, or when you get a planned break between consultations.

Ask for feedback on how you went and what you can improve on if you performed part of the history or examination

Look up any aspects of the consultation you feel would be beneficial for your own study (e.g. pathologies you are unfamiliar with, interpretation of lab results, drug side-effects and interactions).

Reflect and write down what you learned from each consultation, and what you might have done differently. You will also have opportunities to debrief with your colleagues and GP academic staff back on campus.

Learning outside the LOTE consultation

We endeavour to only place language-discordant students in practices where the LOTE is estimated to be used in up to half of all the consultations overall. It would be reasonable to take a break from LOTE consultations when you and the GP are both feeling overwhelmed by the complexities of consulting with the patient, teaching, learning, interpreting and documenting, all at the same time. In these situations, ask the GP whether it would be appropriate to:

- Sit in for part of the day with another GP or registrar who has more English-speaking patients
- Interview an agreeable English-speaking patient in a separate consulting room, if space is available, then presenting the case to the GP
- Spend time helping the reception staff or practice nurse
- Ask whether you can help perform audits, recalls, reminders; or whether they would like to book in suitable patients who speak English who require a health check or cycle of care that you could perform.

Learning in a LOTE placement can be a highly-valuable experience. Embrace the opportunities to learn about the various languages, cultures, and culinary delights in Western Sydney without having to travel overseas. If you have any queries or suggestions, please contact Dr Lawrence Tan

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