

Video Remote Interpreting: Containing Costs While Ensuring Compliance

By Sandra P. Schoenbach D.M.D. (published by Ninth District Dental Association, Sept., 2010 pp.33-35)

You may have read in the March, 2010 edition of the *Bulletin* how it is the doctor's responsibility as the care provider to ensure disabled patients are reasonably accommodated. Deaf and hard-of-hearing patients tend to be the most informed group when it comes to ADA requirements. We frequently hear of cases where doctors and healthcare providers are being held responsible for failing to do so. The majority of these cases involve the failure to provide a qualified interpreter. So what are the costs of providing an interpreter? As with other fields, there are industry standards in the field of interpreting. Let's examine a (perhaps familiar) scenario:

A deaf patient makes an appointment to see the doctor. The patient informs the staff that an interpreter will be needed. The staff locates and schedules an interpreter (cost: minimum 2 hours plus travel time).

- a. The patient and interpreter arrive and the interpreter interprets the appointment, which runs 60 minutes.
- b. The patient cancels the day before the appointment. Dentist's staff cancels the interpreter.
- c. Deaf patient shows up but, due to weather or illness, the interpreter is unavailable.
- d. Interpreter arrives but deaf patient does not.

In cases A, B and C the interpreting agency will bill for two hours, which is industry standard. While the cost of an interpreter varies with the agency, the hourly rate for a nationally certified interpreter tends to start at \$60 per hour. That means you will be paying \$120 for a 60 minute appointment, or worse for no appointment at all. If you take that same scenario and make it a same day assignment, as would be the case for an emergency, you can expect to pay \$20 to \$40 on top of the hourly rate.

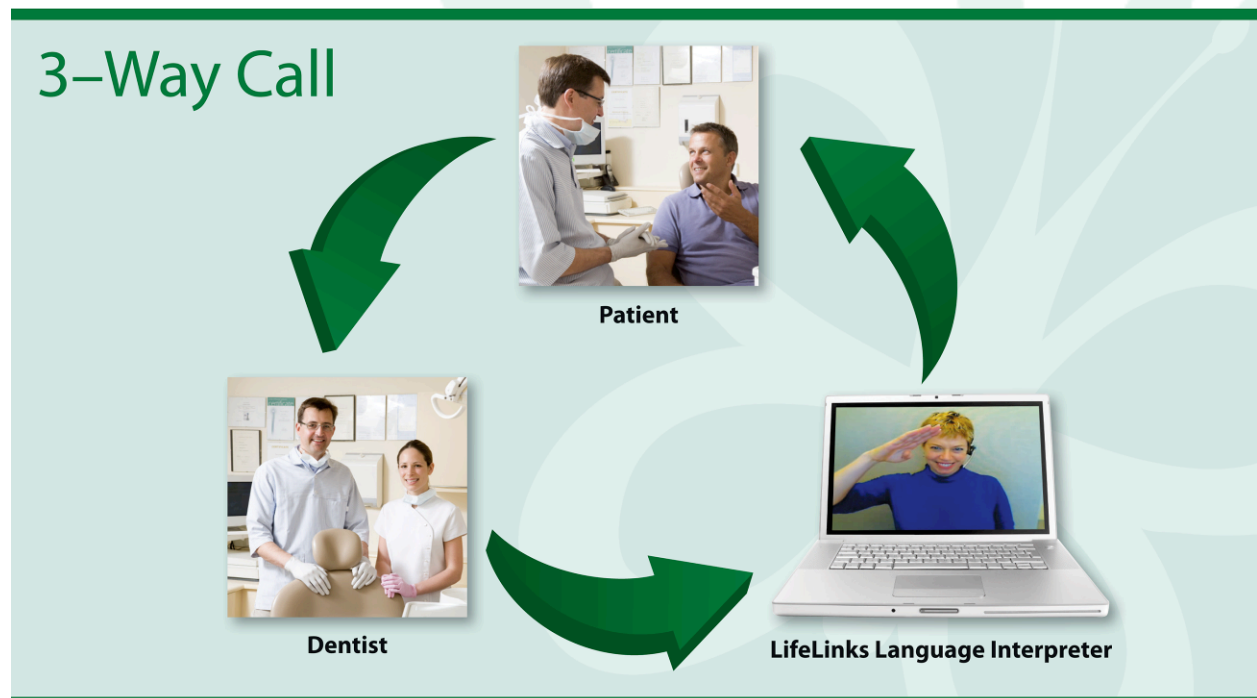
For the physicians who find this hard to swallow: you are not alone. However, the fact of the matter is entitlements to services such as this have been behind multiple court cases across the country. One particular award was as high as \$400,000 in *punitive* damages (Sorrell, 2009)ⁱ not covered by malpractice insurance for a private practice physician in New Jersey who refused to provide an interpreter for a patient. While amounts that high are rare, they serve as a reminder of what can befall a dental physician who fails to grasp the importance of such a decision.

Fortunately, there is an affordable alternative to the use of onsite interpreters. Video conferencing provides doctors the chance to eliminate scheduling problems, two-hour minimums, and cancellation fees associated with hiring on-site interpreters. Referred to as Video Remote Interpreting, VRI allows physicians to use video equipment to connect to an off-site interpreter at the physicians' convenience and normally at a rate that is competitive with on-site interpreters.

Several companies offer VRI. The prices for services vary widely. Some require prepayments, other require minimum connection charges. Contracts are required with most companies, and some entail the purchase or lease of specialized equipment. Some companies offer services over your existing computer with easily added web cameras. In all cases internet access is essential. Bandwidth requirements to use VRI are modest. A Google search for Video Remote Interpreting produced a list of companies. The first listed was a company from New York, LifeLinks Video Interpreting services, which promises to provide a regional, certified American Sign Language interpreter in 60-seconds or less over a 3G connection on a laptop, or any existing computer with an external or internal webcam.

The choice to offer VRI as a substitute for an on-site interpreter should be weighed with the type of service the client prefers. VRI meets the spirit and intent of the ADA and may take a short period of adjustment. However, given that an interpreter is available for the appointment, 24/7/365, it is difficult to argue.

This is how it looks:



Video Remote Interpreting offers a sound cost-effective, efficient solution to the problem of communicating with an often litigious deaf patient while satisfying the requirements of Title III of the Americans for Disabilities Act. It is an easy solution to deploy, and offers the greatest amount of flexibility, thereby saving you time, money and legal exposure.

About the Author:

Sandra P. Schoenbach, D.M.D. is a graduate of the New Jersey School of Medicine and Dentistry and in private practice in cosmetic and pediatric dentistry in White Plains, N.Y. with Leonard B. Kobren, D.M.D.

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