

Interpreter Use and Healthcare Experiences Among Spanish-Speaking Patients

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Introduction

- Hispanic population in the U.S. grew by 23% between 2010 and 2020, with over 41 million Spanish-speakers nationwide¹
- Spanish is the most common non-English language spoken in U.S. homes (62% in 2019)²
- Community health clinics, like the Gary Burnstein Clinic in Pontiac, MI, serve uninsured, low-income Hispanic patients (Pontiac: 24% Hispanic population)³
- Language barriers challenge Spanish-speaking, foreign-born Hispanic patients in healthcare
- Lack of interpreters can worsen health outcomes, decrease trust, and lead to avoidance of care
- Study aim: examine how medical care with interpreter present affects patient trust, satisfaction, and understanding
- Findings highlight the role of interpreters in promoting equitable, patient-centered care for underserved Spanish-speaking communities

Aims and Objectives

- Assess how interpreter use impacts healthcare experiences, understanding, and trust among Spanish-speaking Hispanic patients.
- Demonstrate that care delivered in patients' primary language improves communication, engagement, satisfaction, and health outcomes in these communities.

Methods

Study Design & Setting

Qualitative study
Semi-structured interviews
Conducted at Gary Burnstein Community in Pontiac, MI

Participants

13 Hispanic adults (ages 18–54), Spanish primary language
Recruited via snowball sampling

Data Collection

Brief demographic survey (English proficiency, interpreter use, satisfaction).
In-person interviews, 10–15 min, audio-recorded, transcribed, translated by bilingual author.

Outcome Measures

Patient satisfaction, trust, understanding of medical information, and perceived quality of care with vs. without interpreters

Data Analysis

Thematic analysis of 4 major themes

Results

Theme 1: Communication & Understanding

- Essential for sharing symptoms, asking questions, understanding diagnoses and treatment plans
- Interpreter present: deeper, more meaningful communication
- Language barriers persisted in long-term residents (>15 yrs)
- Barriers led to frustration, confusion, loss of autonomy
- Without interpreters: communication superficial, incomplete
- In-person interpreters preferred over phone/device

Theme 2: Trust & Relationship-Building

- Fostered trust in providers and the healthcare system
- Trust grew if patients felt heard, respected, emotionally secure
- Feelings of security (seguridad)
- Greater confidence in clinicians and care decisions
- Confidentiality and comfort with sensitive topics
- Barriers led to nervousness, insecurity, weak connection

Theme 3: Patient Experiences & Perceived Quality of Care

- Greater comfort, confidence, engagement in appointments
- Interpreter access eased logistical and financial burdens
- High-quality, patient-centered care

Theme 4: Community-Level Experiences

- Impacts broader Spanish-speaking community
- Reliance on children or relatives as interpreters
- Interpreter absence: frustration, helplessness, care avoidance
- Reduces structural barriers, promotes health equity
- Highlights systemic need

Conclusions

- Interpreter services are essential for equitable, patient-centered care for Spanish-speaking patients.
- Lack or insufficiency of interpreters impacts communication, weakens trust, and lowers care quality.
- Language barriers create economic and logistical challenges, often requiring reliance on family or friends for translation.
- On-site, culturally competent interpreters improve patient satisfaction, engagement, and the patient-provider relationship, supporting health equity at both individual and community levels.
- This study confirms previous findings that effective interpreter services enhance communication, trust, and healthcare outcomes for limited-English-proficiency patients.
- It adds insight into the broader community-level impact of language access, showing how reliable interpreter services reduce disparities and promote equitable access to care.



Impact of Interpreter Services on Patient Care

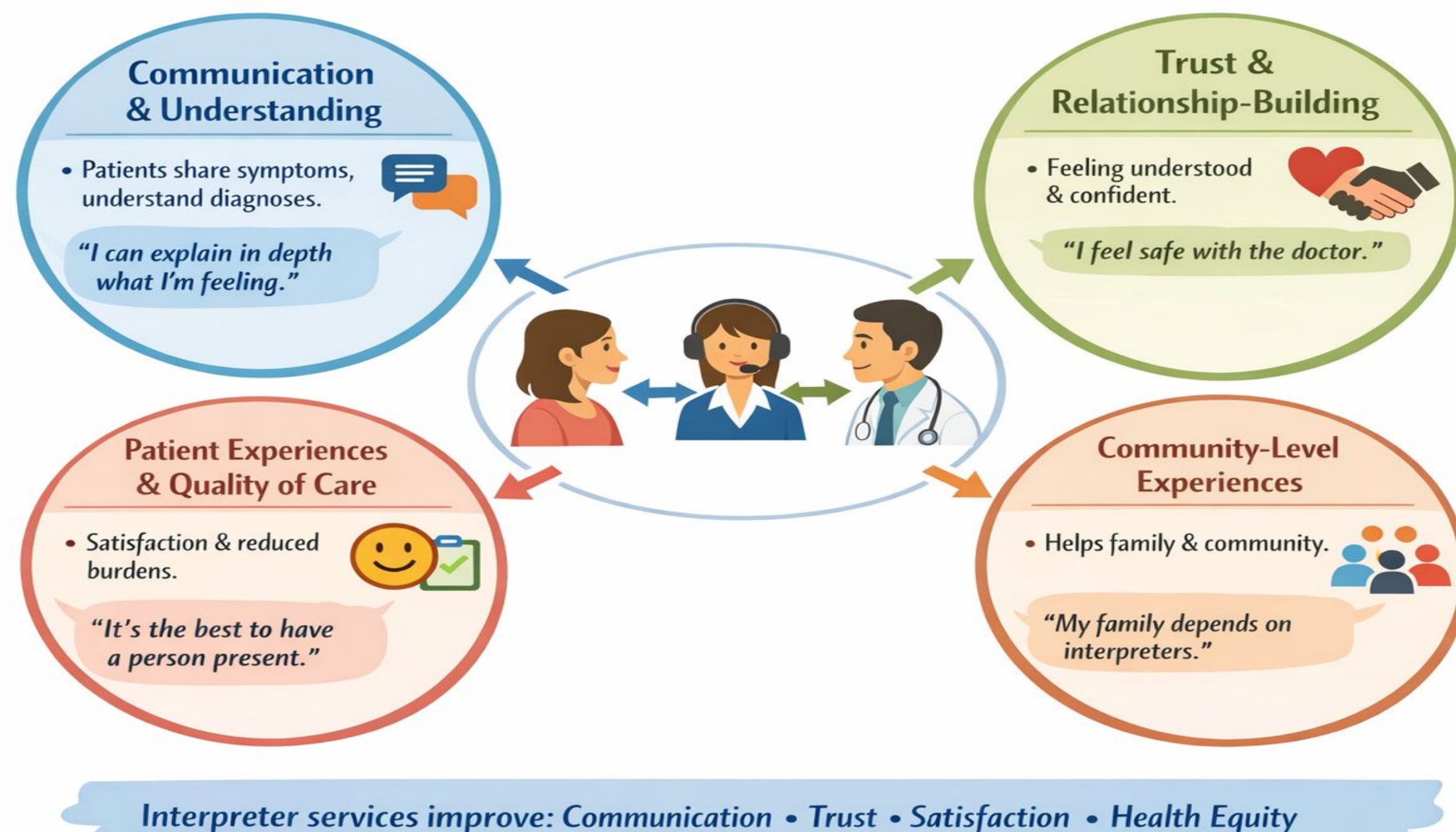


Figure illustrating primary interview themes. Created by Sabrina Lee (concept and design) with AI assistance, 2026.

Theme	Quote
Communication & Understanding	"Because I don't understand or can't express myself, I say the bare minimum." - Teresa
	"I'm sure that he will act according to what he understood correctly... It gives you confidence in what you are receiving." - María
Trust & Relationship-Building	"I feel like the dynamic changes... when there is an interpreter, both the doctor and I can express ourselves well." - Javier
	"I explain everything that's happening to me without embarrassment... because I know it's confidential... but with my oldest son, I'm embarrassed to tell him my personal things." - Isabel
Patient Experiences & Perceived Quality of Care	"I had to pay someone to take me to appointment and to translate for me..." - Isabel
	"It's the best to have a person present, translating what you're feeling." - Ana
Community-Level Experiences	"Almost always I go with my daughter... she's the one who helps me at my medical appointments." - Miguel
	"Sometimes I just don't go to the doctor... if there isn't an interpreter." - María

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