Living abroad in sickness and health: Navigating language and cultural barriers in a foreign health system

Julia Puebla Fortier, Director, DiversityRx
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Executive Director

DiversityRx – Resources for Cross Cultural Health Care

www.diversityRx.org
DiversityRx:
Improving health care for a diverse world

- Policy development
- Research
- Information dissemination
- Education and training

Working with:
- Hospitals and health departments
- Universities
- Philanthropic foundations
- Government agencies
- International organizations
Bay Area > Washington DC > London > Geneva > Kobe
Getting health care in a foreign culture
Emergency Room visit: Foreign patient perspective (me)

- Big red sign at entrance – Emergency Room?
- Reception desk – many signs, nothing in English
- Intake form in Japanese with English translation
- iPhone and Google Translate
- Nurse triage – no English. Called friend on phone
- Doctor and x-ray technician speak English
- Discharge forms in Japanese, another doctor to translate
- Translated map on the way out
How a patient in a foreign environment feels

- Disempowered, frustrated
- Overwhelmed by everyday life -- don’t want to take on the health system too
- Fear interactions I don’t understand, from the first phone call to the actual visit
- Can’t think proactively in the moment, don’t ask questions
- Don’t want to hassle anyone -- just try to be polite and deferential
- Grateful for anything that makes sense
How a patient may act

- Don't do routine care
- Don't do follow-up tests
- Put off going to the doctor until it can’t be avoided
- Don’t know how to find a good doctor
- Go to a doctor just because they speak my language
- Not assertive, don’t try to discuss options
- When we get poor care, don’t report it - just don’t go back
Stories are nice but hard facts impact policy and practices
National survey of foreign patients in Japan

Purpose

1. To analyze the experience of foreign residents and visitors in Japan regarding:
   - their experience accessing health care
   - interactions with health care providers and staff
   - any cultural or linguistic barriers to effective communication and delivery of health care services.

2. To identify opportunities and challenges to improving the health care experience of foreigners in Japan.

Julia Puebla Fortier, DiversityRx, 2015
Survey methods

National online survey (October 2014 – March 2015)

- Survey sponsored by DiversityRx and Osaka University Graduate School of Human Sciences
- 47 question survey in English
- Respondents asked to report on a health care encounter that occurred in the previous 12 months.
- Recruitment through local NPOs and government agencies serving foreigners, international business groups, international schools, and online social media groups. Target audience:
  - Foreign-born residents
  - Expatriate (short-term) professionals and their families
  - Short-term/migrant workers
  - International students and educators
  - Medical tourists
- Convenience sample of 491 respondents, with 22 additional responses after March 2015
Characteristics of respondents: Residence in Japan, Japanese proficiency

- More than 70 percent of respondents were from North America or Europe.
- Respondents resided in more than 100 cities in Japan, with 30 percent living in Tokyo.
- 73 percent spoke English as their primary language at home.
- Although more than half said they lived in Japan for more than four years, the self-reported level of Japanese speaking and writing proficiency was low.
Sample questions

- Did you use an interpreter during this visit to talk to the medical provider or staff?
- If an interpreter was not provided by the office or hospital, did you bring someone else to interpret for you when you talked to the provider?
- If you did not have an interpreter but you needed one, do you think this negatively affected the quality of care you received?

Language issues

- Did the provider give you an easy to understand explanation about your condition and the next steps for your treatment?
- If a prescription was provided, did you understand what the medication was, how to take it, and any possible side effects?
- If the provider ordered additional blood tests, x-rays, or other tests, did she or he explain the reason?
- Did the provider answer all your questions to your satisfaction?
Accessing health services
Foreigners often delay getting care

- People delay getting needed health care for several reasons, including:
  - language or cultural difficulties (57%)
  - concern about the quality of care (28%)
  - difficulty finding a provider (27%)

“I waited longer than I would have back in my home country to seek out health care because I don't speak Japanese. Once I finally went to the doctor, I was referred to another doctor who referred me to another doctor. It was quite complicated.”

“I had also heard that Japanese dentists weren't as good as US dentists, and I have anxiety about dentists, so I put it off for two years until I had a dental emergency (broke a tooth).”
Most have difficulty with basic administrative communications

- Nearly half experienced difficulty making appointments over the phone, and 56 percent had difficulty communicating with the receptionist at the office.

“I was told to find someone to help me and they wouldn’t accept me at the hospital. This often happens. Only the workers in the cafe spoke English.”
Untranslated forms and documents cause difficulties

- Many had difficulty understanding signs and written documents (43%) and one-third could not understand them at all.
- Medical history forms are translated about 1/3 of the time.
- General health information or information specific to a condition was often not understood or not provided.

“I usually do not understand these forms 100% at the time I receive them. I take them home and work on the translations for some time - particularly with the medications... I use Google a lot for this.”

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Language barriers and interpretation
Language is a key concern for many foreign patients

- Nearly half of patients said they often or always need an interpreter.
- 15% said they look for a doctor who speaks their own language.
- Some patients try to use a mix of Japanese and English, with variable results.

"I act as interpreter for my husband. I'm not always sure of what is being said though. I usually have to remember words to look up later. I try to find providers who speak some English, but usually there are not many in this area. We end up communicating in a mix of English and Japanese. “
Not having an interpreter affects the quality of care

- 80% of respondents who needed an interpreter but did not get one said it negatively impacted the quality of care

“I had complications after major surgery and no translator was there to explain what happened and my translator was not there because visiting hours were over and they were made to leave.”

“When having my first child here all my Japanese disappeared and I ended up having quite a difficult time (in delivery) - couldn't understand what I was meant to do and the doctor ended up using a ventouse (vacuum forceps).”
Medical interpreters are still not common

- When interpretation is provided by a facility, it is usually a doctor or other medical staff (46%)
Most people bring untrained interpreters or no one at all

- When an interpreter is not provided by the facility, many people (45%) did not bring someone with them to interpret.

- When they did bring someone, it was usually a friend, family member, work colleague or someone arranged by the workplace. (55%)

- Private interpreters or local agency interpreters are rarely used.

“ My company doesn’t provide a translator so I had to ask a friend. I felt bad because my friend had to take time off work and had to stay with me for 8 hours at the hospital.”
Other methods used when no interpreter is available

- Mixed language conversation 55%
- Smartphone translation program 44%
- Family or friend interpreted over the phone 22%
- Translated questions/answers on paper or cue card 13%

Other: Dictionary or medical book, pictures, signing/body language 12%

(More than one answer allowed)
Non-professional interpreters raise quality, confidentiality concerns

- Interpreters may not always accurately interpret what is said
  - 26% said they did not, or sometimes did not interpret accurately
  - 17% said they didn’t know if the interpretation was accurate

- Respondents also raised concerns about privacy and confidentiality when non-professional interpreters are used

“My husband is Japanese and he wanted to be involved as much as possible. But there were times he struggling with the medical terms and didn't know how to explain well in English.”

“I didn't answer fully and truthfully to all questions, because there were some things I was uncomfortable talking about in front of my boss.”
Interacting with the health provider
Doctors are usually respectful, give basic information

- Most (80%) said their doctor was respectful to them in tone and manner
- Doctors often (44%) described what they were seeing in examinations and explained the reasons for additional tests (46%)
- Most (67%) said the doctor or pharmacy staff explained medications and side effects
Many doctors do not explain conditions or respond to questions

- 54% of patients felt they did not receive a good explanation of their condition or treatment
- Almost half said the doctor showed little or no interest in their questions
- 57% said they did not feel comfortable asking questions they had
- 58% said their questions or concerns were not answered to their satisfaction
- One-third said the doctor did not respond completely to something the patient said
“Most doctors get uncomfortable after 2 questions. Sometimes I am plainly told they don't have time to answer my questions.”

“... some doctors have a chip on their shoulder and scolded me for asking questions and suggesting alternatives, and that If I knew my condition so well then why don’t I just treat myself”
Foreign patients have different expectations from Japanese doctors

- Most patients (80%) thought doctors should discuss treatment related decisions with the patient, but many (60%) said Japanese doctors did not ask the patient what they thought was best for them.

- 30% were not sure if the doctor always told them the truth about their health

“Asking questions and getting answers [about my baby’s condition] was very difficult and they usually answered with, "you do not have to worry, I am taking care or him, you can trust me." This was often frustrating because I did feel like I could trust him, I just wanted to know what was going on and what they were doing about it. I finally called specialists at hospitals in the States and described the situation and asked what they thought might be going on just to get some information I could understand.”
Cultural issues have an impact

- 27% of respondent said cultural issues had an impact on communication with the doctor

“I had one issue with a doctor who refused to look at me when I was sick. He told me "You're American, You are strong! You'll be fine tomorrow" I had a severe case of influenza and the next day my regular doctor told me I wasn't allowed to work for a week.”

“I am used to (from my German background) have any and all questions answered and as much information provided as possible. This however seems to make doctors very uncomfortable here - often it seems, they assume all my questions mean I don't trust them (which is not the case). However, I have to add that doctors I have visited more than once tend to get used to this and even seem to like having someone who is showing real interest in what is going on.”
Discussion

Have you had experiences like this? How did you feel?

How did it affect your physical and mental health status to struggle with these issues?

What helped? What might have helped?
Next steps
Policy Brief and Recommendations

- Policy brief with survey results and recommendation for key stakeholders in Japan
  - Ministry of Health
  - Health care professionals, administrators, educators
  - Interpreters
  - Patient representatives
Uses of this study outside Japan

- Patient experience survey that focuses on the needs of foreigners in a health care system, especially with respect to access, linguistic and cultural barriers.

- Can be used in health care organizations as well as regionally or nationally

- Possibility to do cross country comparisons in future

- Model for the use of social media to access survey participants
Making health services foreigner-friendly

Model programs from North America, Europe, Australia and New Zealand

- Develop a national policy of standards of care for foreign patients (both residents and medical tourists)

- Require training for health professionals and administrative staff on culturally sensitive care practices

- More medical interpreters who are trained are needed. An excellent opportunity for bilingual expats and long-term foreign residents, portable career or part-time work

- Provide funding/reimbursement for interpretation services, medical interpreter training, and awareness raising in the health care system

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Foreigner friendly health services

- Create a national telephone interpretation service, and a database of trained interpreters, available free of charge to patients and doctors
- Create an online database of translated commonly used forms and health information
- Support second language training for health care staff (clinical and administrative)
- Develop resources for doctors and patients to facilitate mixed language conversations (glossaries and phrase books)
- Support development of quality mobile device tools for use by patients and health care staff

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Patients

Patients and representative organizations (employers, embassies, relocation companies, support agencies)

- **Patients:**
  - Be proactive about finding health resources (GP, hospital, dentist, etc) before the need arises. Use screened lists from respected organizations.
  - Find a trained interpreter who can be available in person or by phone.
  - Educate yourself about the host country health system.

- **Representative organizations:**
  - Provide briefings and information on how foreigners can access healthcare in their new country.
  - Develop lists of pre-reviewed health resources.

- **Employers:**
  - Respect privacy by not using patients’ colleagues for interpretation, and pay for professional interpretation.

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BETWEEN WORLDS

Experiencing Midlife as an Expat
**BETWEEN WORLDS**

Experiencing midlife as an expat

- A new project exploring
  - how midlife is experienced by expat women
  - what information and support can benefit women going through this journey.

- Key questions
  - What is the midlife journey? How is it experienced in different cultures, as well as in a cross-cultural situation?
  - What issues do people encounter in midlife generally? As expats? What are the special challenges and opportunities as expats?
  - How can we ease our way through this journey? What support do women seek and benefit from at home? How can this be adapted or reinvented for expats?
BETWEEN WORLDS
Exploratory survey

- First phase: exploratory survey, designed to identify key issues and questions.

- You are invited to complete this survey from the perspective of your personal experience, and to add your professional observations about the questions.

www.surveymonkey.com/r/expatmidlife
Future phases of the project will include an international survey, reported findings, face-to-face and online peer support groups, and a blog.

You can include an email address at the end of the survey if you'd like to receive updates about the project.
For more information on both projects:

bit.ly/1UXn1AQ

Julia Puebla Fortier, rcchc@aol
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