

Patient Doctor Communication in the Era of Medical Tourism

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Letter to the Editor

Medical tourism is a growing sector in India. The primary reason that attracts medical value travel to India is cost effectiveness and treatment from accredited facilities at par with developed countries at much lower cost.

Usually the patients travel with interpreter or one is provided by the hospital for effective communication between the patient and doctor. The presence of an interpreter is invaluable in the preanaesthetic assessment when the anaesthesiologist elicits patient history. But inside the operating room where patient is not accompanied by the interpreter, explaining simple procedures like intravenous cannulation can be cumbersome and increase the anxiety of the patient. Also during the recovery from anaesthesia a person responds best when spoken to in their own language.

Usually at our institute, translations of simple commands (as provided by the interpreter) like take deep breath, open your eyes, do you have pain etc, are documented in the preanaesthetic chart. When this vital step is omitted during preanaesthetic assessment, as we faced recently, mobile translator (google translate) came to our rescue.

An Iraqi lady underwent small bowel resection for Neuroendocrine tumour under general anaesthesia. During reversal from anaesthesia the patient was unable to comprehend our commands and continued to hold her breath, attempts to contact her interpreter over phone were also not successful.

We used Google translate to explain to the patient in her native language that the surgery has been completed. She also responded to simple commands which helped us extubate her, administer additional analgesics and epidural top ups and shift her to post anaesthesia care unit.

Later, to verify the translations, we made the interpreter listen to the translations, who confirmed that they were accurate. We also searched for translations of these simple commands in Google translate and copy pasted these translations of different language in another translation apps to get the same phrase we had started off with, thus verifying the correctness of these translations.

A mobile translator is an application for smart devices that can translate words or phrases in a number of languages. Some of these are Google translator, Bing translator, I Translate etc. Google translate supports 90

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languages at various levels and serves around 200 million people per day [1].

In an article in BMJ by Patil et al, discrepancies were found in translations of medical phrases made by web based apps. They concluded that Google translate has only 57.7% accuracy when used for medical phrase translations and should not be used for important medical communications [2].

Patrick G. Fernandez et al, used text and translation application for communication with a foreign deaf family , for perioperative communication. They also highlighted the need for validation of such technology to ensure that these tools are an effective way to accurately communicate with patients in the perioperative setting [3].

Currently, in view of mobile translators not being fully accurate, we advocate the use of this technology only for simple non medical commands, in situations where interpreter is not available. We suggest that each hospital should form its own database of commonly used phrases for translation in languages (indian or international) most commonly used and should be displayed in the OR for the doctors and other personnel.

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