



In the Absence of Words

**A compilation of personal stories addressing
the language barrier in health care.**

**A project of PALS for Health
funded by The California Endowment**

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Welcome

Veronika Geronimo
Director of PALS for Health

All too often, the voices of those struggling with the English language are silenced, ignored or misunderstood in the health care system. PALS for Health is proud to share this collection of personal stories from our Language Ambassadors and interpreters, whose powerful narratives, told in their own imagery and voices, are featured in this storybook.

Each of the Language Ambassadors has completed a twelve-hour training in public speaking, language rights and advocacy. Through this process, the Ambassadors capture and convey their own personal experiences navigating the health care system as Limited-English Proficient individuals. These diverse stories will inform other immigrants about health care rights; enhance understanding of culturally competent care among health providers and policy makers; and increase awareness of Limited-English Proficient issues in the broader community. More importantly, the storybook is a memento for the Language Ambassadors to commemorate their courage and powerful roles in making the issue of culturally and linguistically competent care increasingly visible. It is through their self-empowerment that this issue is pushed to the forefront of the political and health care agenda.

I would like to thank the PALS for Health staff, interpreters and translators for their commitment to our Limited-English Proficient clients and The California Endowment for their support of the PALS for Health Language Ambassadors. In particular, I salute the courage and sincerity of our Language Ambassadors, who remind us that regardless of the barriers we face, we can all work to promote change and achieve health care access for all.



Introduction

Marchela Iahdjian
Speakers' Bureau Program Coordinator

The Speakers' Bureau is an important component of the work of PALS for Health because it associates actual people, their faces, their lives, and their communication barriers to an issue that is often debated without patient input or presence. Since its inception in 2003, the Speakers' Bureau has grown to include over 20 Language Ambassadors who speak several languages, including Chinese, Spanish, Korean, Japanese, and Thai. A selection of their stories has been compiled in the book *In the Absence of Words*.

Our Speakers' Bureau training, "Learning How to Share Your Story", provides basic public speaking instruction to Limited-English Proficient patients, and helps each individual to develop and present a personal testimony on how each has been affected by a lack of health care interpretation services. As Language Ambassadors, patients raise awareness in the community about the importance of trained medical interpreters and also empower other Limited-English Proficient individuals to speak up for their language rights.

In the Absence of Words' main intention is to educate and raise awareness about the language barrier in health care by presenting individual narratives of challenges and successes. One key message that the book conveys is that language services in health care are a basic human right. The book can be used to educate community members and leaders, policy makers, health care providers, and community organizations about the importance of medical interpretation. We hope that *In the Absence of Words* will not only inspire those who read it, but also become a meaningful, community driven advocacy tool.



Testimony of Mrs. Yong-Nan Wu (Chinese)



One day in early April of 1999, I felt a hard lump in my breast that was later confirmed by the doctors to be breast cancer. I underwent surgery and continued with chemotherapy after the operation. The doctor recommended that I participate in the trial of an experimental chemotherapy drug and asked me to sign a document that had multiple pages. However, I didn't understand English and there was no one who could explain to me the contents of the document. Left with no choice, I dutifully signed my name on every line and placed my faith and trust in the doctor and the heavens above.

The four rounds of chemotherapy that I subsequently went through were excruciatingly painful. I was frightened by my body's reaction to the new medication and worried that the injections were inappropriate for me. I was

Going to the hospital was always a grueling ordeal for me.

especially terrified of the cancer itself because I had always perceived cancer to be a terminal disease. This overwhelming fear, further exacerbated by the fact that I was unable to communicate with the doctor caused me to lose hope in my ability to recover. I was perpetually worried that my disease would only worsen with time and was desperate to find

someone who understood Chinese so that I could talk to the doctor. To this end, every time I was at the hospital for my doctor's visit, I often approached people who looked Asian, but it turned out that they were usually not Chinese. Thus, throughout the course of my treatment, I was never able to ask the nurse about my body temperature, blood pressure, or inquire about any aspect of my medical condition.

I remember that on one of these occasions, I failed to hear the nurse call my name after waiting to see the doctor for an extremely long time. I finally approached the nurse with my waiting ticket and was told that they had already called my name three times. As nobody had responded, they proceeded to see other patients. My name is composed of three syllables but I found out that they had only pronounced two syllables of my name, so of course I didn't understand them.

Going to the hospital was always a grueling ordeal for me. I would leave home at 7 am and return no earlier than 4 or 5 p.m. When I eventually managed to see the doctor, we could not communicate. I did not understand what the doctor was



asking me and the doctor could not understand what I asked him. Consequently, I could never get a grasp of my medical

condition. The only tangible thing I walked away with at the end of these exhausting 10-hour trips was a prescription from the doctor and an utter lack of knowledge regarding my illness. This caused me immense depression and pain.

My circumstances began to change on the day that I saw another patient accompanied by a medical interpreter. Envious of her good fortune, I inquired as to how I could obtain such a service. It was then that I learned that patients who do not speak English are entitled to medical interpreters. From that point on, I learned to call the language agency PALS for Health to book an interpreter for my subsequent medical appointments; with their assistance, my difficulties were largely resolved. The interpreter was able to accurately relay all of the doctor's questions and thoroughly explain what I needed to know about my illness. I finally gained an understanding of my medical condition and progress, the treatment plan, and what I needed to be cautious about. This crucial understanding helped dispel my fears and drastically strengthened

Mrs. Wu's husband, Mr. Hao Chen and PALS interpreter Jack Tsao.

my faith in my own ability to recover and conquer the disease. I believe that this could not have been achieved without the American government's concern for the well-being of its new immigrants. I thank PALS for Health and the help and support provided by its interpreters.

In the past, I had asked my relatives to interpret for me when I went to see the doctor, but their ignorance of medical terminology led to interpretation mishaps that sometimes made the situation worse. Thus, I am painfully aware of the fact that for those people who do not understand English, having the assistance of a professional interpreter makes all the difference in the world. It significantly increases the patient's faith in recovery and decreases their mental burden considerably.

Given that America is a diverse nation composed of multiple ethnicities, language barriers are an enormous problem. For patients, however, the

inability to communicate can become the most sinister of obstacles. It is therefore imperative that medical facilities drastically increase the number of interpreters made available to people from different countries. This is a civil right that we are entitled to by law. Each patient should be made aware of this right in order to more effectively attain the ultimate goal of minimizing unnecessary pain and suffering, and promoting a more rapid recovery to health.

**...the assistance
of a professional
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all the difference
in the world.**

From my personal experiences battling illness over the last 10 years, I am appreciative to the American government for giving me a second chance at life. I also thank the medical interpreters provided by PALS for Health for their invaluable assistance. I am sharing this deeply personal story today in the hopes that others can benefit from it and that, together, we can fight for the medical interpretation services that will lead patients on a faster path to recuperation.

Testimony of Ms. Edna Gutierrez (Spanish)



My name is Edna Gutierrez. I am a cancer survivor patient and I continue to struggle with this illness to this day.

In the year 2000, I was diagnosed with breast cancer at a clinic in East Los Angeles. Following my diagnosis I was transferred to a hospital in North Vermont. At this hospital I had a lot of problems with the language barrier since my English is not fluent. I was unable to understand anything that the doctors and the nurses told me about my condition. Although I repeatedly asked the hospital to provide someone who spoke Spanish to help me, I was never assigned an interpreter. My son would help me occasionally, but he was not able to go to appointments with me all the time.

On the day I was scheduled for a biopsy, the nurses and doctors prepped me, but I realized they were getting ready to do it on the wrong breast. My problem was on the left side and they wanted to do the procedure on the right side. Using hand gestures I tried to tell them that it was the wrong side, but they

were in their own world, they didn't even look at me and simply ignored my attempts to explain. As expected, the results of the biopsy were normal – there were no traces of cancer. The doctors did not find anything because there was nothing in the right breast, so they sent me home. I returned home feeling disappointed and helpless.

As time went by I began to receive green appointment cards in the mail. I would get them every six months, but I did not pay much attention to them because I had lost all confidence in my ability to receive quality care. Moreover, I could not understand what was written on them and why they were being sent. At the time I thought, "Why should I go when I can't even understand them?" Time went by and four years later I could no longer tolerate the strong, shooting pain in my breast. I decided to go back to the same hospital.

Starting then, everything happened so quickly. My cancer had now advanced to stage four. During this time my children would help me interpret everything at the doctor's appointments. I relied on them and other family members since the hospital did not have professional interpreters available. My daughter, who was 15 years old at the time, was able to understand, but she said she did not know how to tell me in Spanish. She

I would call my brother, who is a truck driver, to help me communicate with my doctor over the phone, without realizing how traumatic the experience was for him.

understood the doctor's negative diagnosis, but didn't want to tell me that my condition was so bad. After she found out that they would have to remove my breast, she wouldn't speak and go to school for days; she would cry and just tell me "everything will be fine".

Often times I would call my brother, who is a truck driver, to help me communicate with my doctor over the phone, without realizing how traumatic the experience was for

him. On the day of the consultation for the surgery, I asked the doctor what my chance of survival was. I waited several minutes until the staff could locate a Spanish-speaking nurse to help interpret. But no one came, and so I dialed my brother once again. He was on the road, traveling. It was devastating for him

to have to tell me that my chances of survival were only 30% going into surgery. Later, he told me that he had to pull over and even took a couple of days off to gather himself because he was so affected by this and because he could not be there to give me emotional support.

It is very sad when you are unable to communicate due to language constraints. Many mistakes occur, maybe even the loss of lives. I have been in many difficult situations. Even now that I know my rights, it is difficult to obtain an interpreter consistently because hospitals do

not provide them.

I found out about PALS for Health when I attended a health fair and met Mireya Muñoz, the Alas para tu Salud program manager at PALS for Health. Through her, I learned that I was entitled to a health care interpreter because this was a basic, human right protected by law. I began to use PALS interpreters and the quality of my care improved immediately. I gained confidence in my treatment

and recovery. I also joined the PALS for Health Speakers' Bureau and attended a public speaking training that encouraged me to speak-up for the rights of others like me, who have experienced the language barrier. I am fortunate to have this invaluable service from PALS for Health as I continue my treatment. I hope my story will encourage others who do not understand English to demand their language rights the next time they seek medical care.



*Edna and Alas para tu Salud Program
Manager Mireya Muñoz*

Testimony of Anonymous PALS Client (Japanese)

I am HIV positive.

It was thirteen years ago that I was diagnosed as HIV positive back in my home country, Japan. After learning about my diagnosis, I went through a period of time when I could not accept the fact that I was positive. I worried myself to death, all alone. Feeling so isolated, I even thought about killing myself. However, as time passed by, I gradually began to accept my condition and, soon after, I found myself seeing a doctor, receiving HIV care and taking medications.

My HIV care at the hospital in Japan was progressing quite smoothly for a while. My CD4 count, which is one measurement of my immune system, had been fairly stable for the past three-four years. However, my viral load, which indicates how active the HIV virus is in the blood, started to creep up and one day it became detectable. I had requested the resistance test, however when I wasn't able to receive this service

for more than a year I began to doubt the quality of care and found myself unable to trust my doctor.

This was the point when I began to think about getting better HIV care somewhere else. I decided to come to the United States. It was two years ago when I actually arrived to Los Angeles.

Back then, I was not even sure if I could get HIV care in Los Angeles, so the first thing I decided

(My interpreter) helped me understand my health and helped give me a voice when I couldn't do it myself.

to do was to look for HIV support organizations. Since I didn't speak English well, I searched the internet for a Japanese-speaking organization, however I had difficulty finding one for a very long time. I felt anxious and impatient. Also, my visa was soon due to expire. It was only a few days before I had to return to Japan when I finally found an organization called Asian Pacific AIDS Intervention Team (APAIT). I understood that they had staff who

could speak a little Japanese. I was filled with anxiety when I was on my way to my first visit to APAIT. I wasn't sure if I would be able to express myself, what I was going through, and whether I would be able to receive the care I needed. But my anxiety quickly turned into joy and hope when I learned that the staff had arranged for a professional interpreter to assist me. I found out in the initial interview that I was able to receive HIV care at a clinic, to get medications, and to receive

Many of us, as patients, don't know that we are entitled to interpretation services when we go to the doctor.

interpretation services. The interpretation services would be provided at no cost by PALS for Health, a sister organization of APAIT. I was happy. In that moment I realized that I could take my first step toward my life in Los Angeles.

I have been receiving interpretation services through PALS for Health since then. Every time I have a medical appointment, the interpreter comes to the site and stays with

me until the end. The quality of interpretation this interpreter provides is so good! He knows the medical terms well, keeps things confidential, and always stays in a neutral position as he interprets, without adding his own opinion. What I like most about his interpreting is that he does it in a first person voice. It almost makes me feel as though I am talking to

my doctor one on one. My visits to the clinic are very pleasant since my appointments always go smoothly. I believe my doctor feels the same way. And after appointments, the interpreter sometimes takes me to the lab, pharmacy and other sites that I need to visit, and even helps me go through the process until I get used to it. I've been requesting the same interpreter every time since then and I am so thankful for this invaluable service.

Often times, while waiting in the

waiting room, my interpreter tells me about his work. I have learned that it is through rigorous training and continuous education at PALS for Health that he is able to provide this level of interpretation, which makes my visits very pleasant and beneficial.

I have learned that every one of us is entitled to interpretation services, if necessary. PALS for Health has also educated me about my own language rights as a person who doesn't speak English fluently. Many of us, as patients, don't know that we are entitled to interpretation services when we go to the doctor. Some providers and administrators may know that they need to provide this service, and yet they use untrained staff or anyone else to interpret matters about health that can be about life and death. The solution to these problems, I believe, is to have more training for medical interpreters and to educate the public as well as the providers.

I have been lucky to receive interpretation from PALS for Health since the beginning of my treatment

in the United States. I believe it was due to these services that I was able to become a part of the Los Angeles community. I would surely have given up on the idea to stay and live here if it wasn't for the interpreter from PALS for Health who helped me understand my health and helped give me a voice when I couldn't do it myself. I feel the happiest ever in my life.

When she was alive, my mother used to say, "You, my son, owe it all to other people when good things happen to you." I know I owe it all to organizations like APAIT and PALS for Health when such a simple letter like this is being published. I do appreciate the opportunity to tell my story and perhaps impact many other people who are in similar positions.

Thank you very much.

Testimony of Mr. Shi Heng-Xiao (Chinese)

My wife and I came to the United States because our children were here. We lived in America for eight years. Even though we possessed some foundation in English, China's well-known closed-door policies had not given us any opportunity to train our listening and speaking skills. After arriving in America, we lived in a Chinese-speaking environment so we didn't really attempt to improve our English. Now I regret not continuing to learn English. I often feel deaf and mute. Every time I go to see the doctor, I feel as if I can neither move forward nor backward. I can only express such emotions through a Chinese proverb: "The roof is leaking, and it is pouring outside."

In the first few years when I fell ill, language became an extra burden. However, one day when I was reading the "World Journal" newspaper, I came upon an article about PALS for Health. I suddenly felt as though I had discovered a new world. I can still vividly remember how excited I was. I immediately called my wife from another room to read this article. Our shared

feeling was that a burden had been lifted. The leaking roof had finally seen the end of rain.

In recent years, from cataract surgery to carotid artery blockage to many other illnesses, we have both received interpretation services from PALS for Health. We deeply appreciate their warm, genuine service. All our PALS for Health interpreters possess work attitudes that are professional and kind.

My wife was a doctor in China. She highly respects the interpreters' professionalism and their knowledge of medical terminology. I once had a female interpreter accompany me to a physical therapy session for my ankle. Because the condition was unusual, she looked up the word in the dictionary to find the exact medical terminology. We all know that in the conversation between doctor and patient, the most important part of communication is the usage of correct medical terminology.

Due to space constraints, I'm going to relate only two personal experiences

to show you the impact language barriers have had on our health care. The first transpired a few years ago. Due to the reoccurrence of a low fever, I was hospitalized in a well-known Long Beach facility for “Septic Pleurisy.” I recovered after undergoing treatment for my illness and remained in the hospital for 18 days. At that time, I did not know that I could request medical interpretation, nor was I aware of the services offered by PALS for Health. As a result, I did not understand what was happening when I entered the hospital and was still confused when I left the hospital.

For example, during my first few days in the hospital, the nurse wanted me to save my urine and stool samples. I only heard her say “pee-pee” and “poo-poo,” words that even a child could grasp but that for some reason I could not. The

We all know that in the conversation between doctor and patient, the most important part of communication is the usage of correct medical terminology.

nurse then gestured repeatedly with her hands in front of her abdomen and lower back to show me what she meant. I kept on saying “urine” and “excrement” for verification, yet we still couldn’t communicate. Finally, another nurse later came and helped resolve the problem.

In another instance, I had to undergo an arterial blood draw. Obtaining blood from an artery is different from obtaining blood from a vein because it requires that the needle penetrate much deeper and straighter down my wrist. Unfortunately, since I couldn’t understand the doctor’s instructions, the blood draw was successful only after four attempts, at the conclusion of which the doctor was exhausted and I was in severe pain.

The second story concerns my wife, who had one carotid artery that was

79% blocked. The first cardiovascular specialist we consulted was a doctor who spoke Chinese. He told us that “an operation must be arranged immediately, this can’t wait.” However, given how risky the operation was, the decision to go to surgery could not be made lightly. At that point, I already knew that I could seek help from PALS for Health. As a result, my wife went to a famous Los Angeles medical center to seek the opinion of a second cardiovascular specialist. This doctor’s conclusion was that “there is no need for surgery now, but follow up with scheduled visits.”

It has been three years since then and there is no change in her condition. If we had followed the advice of the first doctor, my wife would have undergone a risky surgery and be subject to any potential complications. Moreover, the cost of the surgery was estimated to be at least \$100,000. Due to the assistance of the medical interpreter from PALS for Health, my wife avoided a major operation and we saved the government a considerable expense.

In conclusion, we seek to implore all related agencies to give their full and unwavering support to medical interpretation services for the following reasons:

1. The democratic principles that America was founded on and its comprehensive laws attract citizens from different parts of the world to immigrate to America. America has provided various assistance programs to immigrants and PALS for Health is one of them. American laws have long required medical facilities to provide language interpretation to patients. Yet, despite the expansion of such operations in recent years, even today the services offered by organizations like PALS for Health are still not widely known, at least in the Chinese community. I urge related agencies to increase their efforts in educating the public about their right to medical interpretation assistance and the accessibility to such services.
2. The law requires each medical facility, including private doctors, to provide interpretation services. The reality of the situation, however,

is that such services are still woefully inadequate. The frequent communication barrier between doctors and patients not only results in significant waste of manpower and resources but can also lead to medical conflicts at times, even incurring drawn out lawsuits that are contrary to the intention of the law.

3. The simple fact that my wife avoided a costly surgery saved the government an estimated \$100,000 in medical expenses. Each year, America adds millions of new immigrants. Even if a mere 1% of this population receives medical interpretation services, it would still save the government a tremendous amount of money in unnecessary medications, bureaucracy, hospitalization, and

medical lawsuits. In light of this, the savings far outweigh the costs of interpretation. It is extremely unfortunate that the current budget for medical interpretation is limited, leading to insufficient staffing and the failure to fully integrate interpretation agencies.

I would like to take this opportunity to plead with the U.S. government, charity organizations, providers, and community groups to re-evaluate the absolute importance of medical interpretation services and to significantly increase funding towards this noble goal. The end result will be increased peace, prosperity and longevity of the community.

PALS for Health Speakers' Bureau Participants



Testimony of Mrs. Lian Zhen Li (Chinese)



I would like to thank PALS for Health for giving me this opportunity to share my personal experiences.

I am a cancer patient. I came to Los Angeles from Shenyang, China in 1989. Having enjoyed 15 years of busy but smooth-sailing life, I was suddenly struck with an unexpected disaster in 2005. Over the course of a couple of days, my belly swelled up just like a balloon and I had abdominal pain. Soon I was unable to move around, drink water or eat anything; I couldn't even sleep. Since my English is not very good, I went to a Chinese-speaking clinic the next day where the doctor ordered CT scan and blood tests. The lab results unfortunately indicated that I had advanced ovarian cancer. I was very scared, but the doctor gave me confidence. Since I was in urgent need of an operation, the doctor immediately referred me to a County hospital.

A friend of mine went with me to the hospital the next day. With my friend's help, I was able to communicate with the doctor who

explained my situation to me. We made an arrangement for my next appointment. During my next visit to the hospital, my friend was unable to accompany me. I looked around and saw that all the doctors and nurses were non-Chinese; this made me very nervous because I thought, I don't speak a word of English, how would I communicate with them? In fact, when I went in to my appointment, I did not understand a word my doctor was saying and neither did he understand me. I was told to return with someone who speaks English and Chinese. The language barrier seems to be such a huge problem; I was extremely discouraged and depressed. I didn't know what to do.

I began scanning the crowd in the hospital lobby hoping to find someone who might be able to help me. That's when my eyes rested upon an Asian woman with short stubby hair on her head,



Lian Zhen Li and PALS for Health interpreter Aida Hung

apparently a recovering cancer patient. I walked up to her and said hello. I asked her, "Are you a patient here?" She said yes. I asked, "Do you speak English?" She said no. Then I asked her how she communicates with the doctors and she said interpreters from an organization called PALS for Health have been there to help her during each appointment.

She sensed my anxiety and told me not to worry. She gave me the phone number for PALS for Health so that they can help me with my language difficulties. I was overjoyed. At that moment I had hope that I can have my life again. I called PALS for Health right away. They provided free interpreters for my weekly visit to the doctors. During each visit, the interpreters always conveyed exactly what I said to the doctors enabling me to receive the much needed medical attention. In the

Any provider receiving government funding is responsible for providing interpreting services for people like me, who are unable to understand English.

two and half years of my treatment plan, including operation, chemotherapy, and follow-up appointments, the PALS for Health interpreters were with me every step of the way. Their help gave me strength and confidence to survive cancer, and these were key to

restoring my health. I sincerely appreciate the PALS for Health staff and medical

interpreters.

By sharing my experience, I would like to impart this information with those who are reading: The 1964 Civil Rights Act guarantees the equality of all people regardless of race, color, country of origin, and language. If you encounter language difficulties in receiving medical attention, you have the

right to ask the doctors to provide professional interpreting services. Any provider receiving government funding is responsible for providing interpreting services for people like me, who are unable to understand English.

PALS for Health is a free service

to the patient. I would like to take this opportunity to encourage government agencies and charitable organizations to prioritize funds to this worthy cause so that more people can benefit from it. I sincerely thank the government, the community and charitable organizations for their concern in our well-being.

Language Ambassador Lian Zhen Li, accompanied by PALS for Health interpreter Sunny Johnston, shares her story at a press conference in Los Angeles.



Testimony of Mr. Jack Z. (Chinese)

My name is Jack. Let me start off by saying that when I had to take my child to Children's Hospital in 1997, the hospital asked a professional medical interpreter, Miss Yang, to facilitate the communication process. As a result of this experience, by the time that I myself began to get sick, I already knew that professional interpretation agencies existed which could help me with my communication barriers. Thus, through the seven years of my illness, things ran pretty smoothly thanks to the assistance of these professional interpreters. Nevertheless, language barriers still led to some unfortunate incidents during those seven years.

I became ill towards the end of 1999. Within six months, over ninety percent of my joints became inflamed. I had been going to see a Chinese family doctor and was taking some generic painkillers, but to no avail. My condition worsened to the point when half a year later, not only was I unable to walk but I could not even stand up. I could only sit in my wheelchair or lay in bed; each day brought tremendous

pain. In October of 2000, my inflammatory condition caused such severe anemia that I was finally hospitalized. There, doctors initiated a thorough work-up and I began receiving comprehensive treatment for my illness.

My story occurred around May or June of 2001. Having been paralyzed for over a year and a half, my body was suffering from generalized muscle atrophy. In order for me to better regain joint function, the doctor recommended that I receive more aggressive physical therapy in addition to my other treatments. I was subsequently transferred to another hospital, but the transfer occurred on such short notice that I did not have time to make an appointment with the interpreter.

The doctor who examined me at the new facility did not have my medical history and was unaware of the cause of my joint inflammation. He only saw how severe the inflammation was, especially my knees, which were swollen like large lumps of bread. After retrieving several thick needles and sterilizing items, the

doctor explained that he wanted to extract a sample of joint fluid and inject a medication into my knee joints. I asked him what kind of medication it was but could only grasp that the name of the drug ended with a syllable that sounded like “song.” However, given that in Chinese many steroids also have names that end in “song,” I refused the doctor’s treatment. I understood that my disease was immune-mediated, and that steroids would not have resolved the problem. Unfortunately, due to our language

without even knowing my medical history. In reality, the fundamental problem was a misunderstanding on both sides caused by a basic language barrier.

Because of this unhappy experience, I requested to be transferred back to my original hospital. After obtaining the proper treatment, I recuperated to the point where I no longer needed my wheelchair or walking canes, and could even take care of myself by cooking, cleaning, and performing other basic daily

Together, let us fight to overcome this obstacle by urging medical facilities to obey the law and build an effective, comprehensive medical interpretation service.

barrier, I was unable to explain the results of my previous work-up from the other hospital. Consequently, the doctor thought I was being rude by refusing his treatment whereas I, on the other hand, was displeased with a doctor who seemed to be irresponsibly prescribing a treatment

tasks. My successful recovery can be attributed in large part to the continuous assistance from medical interpreters.

I am here to share my story with you because I feel that it is my obligation to call attention to

the fact that language services in medical facilities are still severely neglected today. As a result of this neglect, a large part of the population is grossly underserved and forced to undergo unnecessary pain and suffering in the course of their medical treatment, even to the point of endangering their lives

There is no doubt that the language

barrier remains an enormous problem in medical facilities and that we need more support and encouragement from all related organizations to address this crucial issue. Together, let us fight to overcome this obstacle by urging medical facilities to obey the law and build an effective, comprehensive medical interpretation service.



Testimony of Ms. Martha Castro

(Spanish)



My name is Martha Castro and I immigrated to the United States from Mexico about 27 years ago. I want to share my story with you, a very difficult one.

Years ago, my youngest daughter, who was only 18 months old at the time, had an emergency. She began having uncontrollable convulsions and seizures to be exact. We immediately went to the emergency room at the hospital. Everyone was rushing and running around but I did not understand anything that was going on. I asked the emergency room staff what was happening, but nobody could help me. The hospital did not have an interpreter. I began to cry because no one would say anything, or rather they would, but there was no way I could understand them.

After five days of tests, I was given a diagnosis for my daughter. Among the patients in the waiting room, we looked for someone who could help us understand what the doctor was saying. Through another Spanish-speaking patient, the doctor told us that the problem my daughter suffered was

terminal. He diagnosed her with tuberous sclerosis. The only thing I understood from all that was said in the meeting was when the doctor told me she had only five years left to live.

The person who was helping me did not dare interpret this at first because the news was so shocking, but he finally told me the terminal diagnosis. Filled with pain and frustration, I was only able to ask if the doctor considers himself to be God. The doctor managed to explain to me a little bit more about my daughter's illness, but it was terrible to leave his office not knowing what was happening with my child, and instead just being full of anger.

Sometime later, during my daughter's check-up appointment, they provided me with an interpreter. It made a great difference. I was able to ask questions and understand what I was being told. My daughter is still alive today with the help of medication.

The experience I went through with my daughter illustrates the difficulties of not having an interpreter.

I have struggled with the language barrier for a long time. Even though throughout the years I have asked my kids to interpret for me, in a way I don't want to be cruel to them by asking them to listen to the doctor's diagnosis. It's frustrating for me as a patient, for my family, and for the doctor. For several years I couldn't speak about my daughter's condition. After coming to PALS

for Health and sharing my story, the first time it brought me to tears. But little by little, I felt better and now it's much easier for me to share my testimony.

That is why I beg all of those who are able to support and enforce language rights laws, to help people like me because it makes a great difference in our lives to be able to communicate with our doctors. Thank you.



Language Ambassador Martha Castro (far right) participating in a press conference on health care access.

Testimony of PALS Interpreter Ms. Ana Maria Garcia (Spanish)

Along the years of my career as a Spanish interpreter I have had numerous experiences that I could share with you. One in particular comes to mind; it's about a gentleman I had the pleasure of interpreting for many times. He was a football soccer coach back in his country.

At one point in his life he had an accident and suffered brain damage due to this accident. The part most affected was his speech area; he knew what he wanted to say, but making the words travel from his brain to his lips was very difficult for him. As if that wasn't enough, he was also faced with the language barrier. He seemed like a very educated man, but unfortunately spoke no English. You can imagine how frustrating this was for him. I was assigned to go out into the community with him and work on his people skills. We worked on mastering things like starting simple conversations, accomplishing simple money transactions, ordering a meal or just asking for his shoe size at the store.



Throughout these interpretation assignments, we encountered many different people and faced many different reactions from these people. Some were good and others not so good. We were able to accomplish all the tasks assigned to him, some with great difficulties others fairly easy.

I was fortunate to witness his joy when he realized that through his interpreter he was able to succeed in making himself understood. He was able to demonstrate that he could comprehend the instructions given; it was just difficult to convey the message not only because of his handicap, but because of the language barrier. It was wonderful to be able to help him communicate

and to share his joy in seeing that his great efforts were not in vain.

What I enjoy most about my job, I must say, is everything. Coming across so many different people who face great needs and who allow me to be part of the solutions to their problems is truly inspirational. Through my role as an interpreter, I help limited-English Proficient (LEP) people reach positive results in their health care by facilitating

communication and a sense of understanding. At each assignment I have the opportunity to learn so much

about different cultures, because although I am dealing with people who speak the same language as I do, most come from diverse cultural backgrounds. I also enjoy the variety of assignments we take because we never really know what our next assignment may bring.

What I find most rewarding as a health care interpreter is seeing the look of relief on people's faces when they know they are able

to communicate and understand everything during the session with their doctor. They leave their appointment feeling assured that no question is left unanswered.

We, as interpreters, run into challenges all the time. Personally, I find it very challenging when I come across an LEP patient who is using a term used uniquely in their country that I am not familiar with.

I always make sure that I inquire properly and in the most professional way what the term means to them so that I can understand exactly what they are trying to say. This is one of many techniques my training at PALS for Health has afforded me in order that I may interpret in the most accurate way.

Another challenging moment for me is when a health care provider challenges my interpretation. I always try my very best to have my interpretation tools (such as medical dictionaries, notes, etc.) at hand

After all, there is nothing quite like the feeling of being truly understood.

during my assignments in case I encounter one of these challenging providers. It is best to be prepared with the proper information to prove that I stand by my interpretation or stand corrected, whatever the case may be, always doing so in the most professional manner.

Language services are important because in my experiences I have seen people shy away from going to a doctor simply because they fear not being understood. Having language services at medical facilities makes patients feel more at ease about going to the doctor, explaining all their symptoms and concerns, and ultimately receiving the care they need. I honestly believe that having language services will help keep medical costs down by preventing misunderstandings in describing symptoms to a doctor or misunderstandings in following a doctor's instructions on how to take a medication or follow exercise or diet regimens. Knowing that LEP patients are able to communicate with a doctor and understand the doctor's instructions gives them a feeling of security, to which we all have the right to have.

It is extremely important to advocate for language services and equally important that people listen to these stories. It is terrible to think how some LEP patients have struggled, both psychologically and physically, due to being unable to communicate properly. It is important that everyone out there is aware of the experiences many LEP individuals have been through.

I began working with PALS for Health/ALAS Para tu Salud back in 2003. I was part of the first group of trainees to graduate from the ALAS "Connecting Worlds Training" and was deployed to interpret in the Spanish-speaking community in Los Angeles. I am honored to be part of such a wonderful organization. PALS for Health/ALAS para tu Salud does so much to advocate for language rights and is always there to help with language needs. Through my years with PALS/ALAS, I have had the honor to learn about so many different cultures and cultural beliefs, an aspect of the interpreting field that I find highly important to recognize, understand and master.

Health care interpreters have a very important role in the well-being of our community because we give a voice to those who cannot speak for themselves. It is important that providers recognize the need to not only provide language services, but to

do so in a quality way – making sure that their interpreters are properly trained and culturally aware. After all, there is nothing quite like the feeling of being truly understood.



Ana Maria Garcia interpreting for Language Ambassador Martha Castro.

Testimony of PALS Interpreter Ms. Chia-Rhu Yang (Chinese)

I have been a medical interpreter since 1996, mostly working for PALS for Health. When I first began this profession, I knew that by using my bilingual knowledge and public speaking skills I could help Limited-English Proficient (LEP) patients voice their needs. However, what I did not know was that an interpreter was more than just someone who is bilingually capable. Being a competent interpreter requires special skills and knowledge. I am so glad that PALS for Health offers trainings, case conferences, and continuing education support to build up the competency of their interpreters and expand their confidence and knowledge.

In my time here I have heard and collected numerous stories, both good and bad, about my patients' experiences with the language barrier. In the absence of a professional interpreter people usually make do with what limited resources are available, often with unintended consequences.

A patient once told me a story about his experience prior to finding the services of PALS for Health. A



bilingual staff member had been asked to help interpret during his appointment. Throughout the whole session, the untrained bilingual staff repeatedly referred to a patient's organ as "that part". The patient told me at the end of that session, he still had no idea what "that part" was referring to, the front or the back of the body.

On another occasion, when a doctor asked a mother how her daughter was infected with HIV, the mother was shocked. So the doctor pointed to the patient's in-take form and asked, "Then why did you check HIV positive here?" The mother responded that when her friend helped fill out the form she asked if her daughter had such and such symptoms; the daughter had all the rest, so she checked all the symptoms in that particular box.

Often, patients with no other option use their English-speaking children

as interpreters. While appreciating their children's help, they also complain to me that the children would not allow their parents to fully express their concerns, often for reasons such as, "That's not important", "It's so embarrassing", "The doctor does not have to listen your nagging." Another common problem is that after consulting with the provider, many adult children do not take the time to explain what the provider has said to the patients. This puts senior patients in an anxious state. Finally there are situations where both the LEP parent and the English-speaking child become frustrated because the child does not know how to explain the situation in the parent's native language.

These are only a few true stories from my patients about how a well-intentioned but untrained interpreter

aggravated the situation instead of solving the problem.

Of all my personal experiences, the most memorable and emotional was when I interpreted for a little girl who was terminally ill. I cannot forget the scene on the last day of the girl's life. After the nurse fixed her catheter, this little, frail patient

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waved to me to interpret the following statement to the Nurse, "You are Number One in the world, thank you for taking care of me." The memory of "You are

Number One" remains vivid in my mind even after all these years. It is a testament that as health care interpreters, we are vital not only in bridging the language barrier to express a patient's concerns, but also in helping our patients to voice gratitude to their providers.

Health providers are not the only ones who feel loss when their patient passes away. Interpreters also face



emotional stress and loss when the patient they interpret for loses the battle. Relieving this kind of emotional stress and other concerns we come across in the field caught the attention of the PALS for Health staff a long time ago. In 2003, PALS for Health established a case conference series to give interpreters a venue to share their precious experiences and learn best practices from each other. Each case conference is led by a professional facilitator and conducted in a confidential setting. I personally learn a great deal from the conferences as they are such a valuable resource.

I sincerely believe the philosophy that God helps those who help themselves. While we as interpreters are doing our part to facilitate the communication process, LEP patients have the responsibility to advocate for their rights as well. No matter how many stories interpreters recount, nothing is worth more than personal testimonies coming from their own voice.

Looking back at the past 12 years of my work as an interpreter, “amazing” epitomizes all my feelings. I never imagined that from my modest

thoughts of helping LEP people’s needs by getting involved in PALS for Health’s mission, I would have the opportunity to observe how this voice has moved the development of a language-friendly world for LEP patients throughout California. In a multicultural and multi-ethnic city like Los Angeles, utilizing a trained interpreter has become a critical trend in many settings. PALS for Health has always taken the lead on health care interpreting issues, worked hard to promote quality interpreting services, supported LEP patients’ language rights, and established a healthy space for interpreters to grow professionally. I am blessed to be part of this team serving as a consultant, trainer, coach, speaker, and facilitator. While PALS for Health continues its mission, our multi-linguistic society should no doubt plead policy makers and funding sources to squarely face the increasing need for better communication for LEP people. We need to recognize the importance of quality interpreting and continue to support this important work to help build a better, healthy and harmonious multicultural community.

Testimony of PALS Interpreter Ms. Trinidad Jaime-Washington (Spanish)

The worst feeling in the world is being unable to understand, to know; this is helplessness. That is how I felt back in the 1980's when I was learning how to navigate the health care system in a new county. My husband and I had just immigrated to the United States.

I was pregnant with my first child at the time. I remember how anxious I felt when I was unable to communicate with the doctor at the pre-natal clinic. I could not tell the doctor how long I had been pregnant or whether my name was my last name or first name. I had to ask anyone nearby at the clinic to see if they could interpret in Spanish for my appointment. Some people would say no, but others were generous with their time and knowledge. In their eyes, I could see how good they felt when they were able to help others. I remember taking mental notes and thinking that I would like to do that some day when I learn

English well.

Today, as a bilingual medical interpreter, that is just the feeling I get, now that is my turn to help others who cannot communicate with their doctors and nurses. After learning English, I heard about the interpretation services of PALS for Health and became interested in taking their training to become a Spanish medical interpreter. I took the "Connecting Worlds" training



which helped me to develop my skills as an interpreter and medical vocabulary. I enjoy the immediate gratification I experience when a mom with a sick child says "Thank you for helping me understand," but also when a doctor or a nurse appreciates my small contribution to the wellbeing of patients. My work as a medical interpreter is like shining a little light over a big tower of Babble.

Being an interpreter in this field is challenging and often unsettling. It is difficult when neither the patient nor the doctor understand the value and role of a trained interpreter. Some do not realize that just because a person is bilingual, this does not immediately make him or her qualified to interpret specialized medical terminology and to properly handle cultural factors between a patient and a provider. Sometimes I leave the doctor's office feeling very inadequate and powerless because I may sense that not everyone sees my work as an important job; not everyone values the ability of a medical interpreter. They may see an interpreter as a mere inconvenience that must be put up with in order to communicate with the patient. When I feel this way, I remember all that PALS for Health has taught me. Through PALS for Health's training, continuing education seminars, and case conferences, I learned that the right to language services is stipulated in Title VI of the Civil Rights Act of 1964. This knowledge makes me feel empowered and gives me strength to encourage non-English speakers of all languages to

demand health care services that can be understood by the patient. Interpreting is one of the most important services that providers can offer to the patients who need it. Communication is essential when someone is dealing with health problems. Medical interpreters are an important link that non-English speakers need to be able to communicate when it is most vital. Without an interpreter, doctors cannot help a person who does not understand what is being communicated to them. A person who does not know how to describe their symptoms cannot help a doctor know even where to begin. The situation is similar to talking to a baby who simply cannot tell you where it hurts. It's like a mute person, without something to write with.

As someone who has been on both sides of the language divide, I can give you my personal testimony through both the perspective of a non-English speaking person and that of a bilingual interpreter. I can tell you that there is more out there than meets the eye. Non-English

speakers do not just suffer possible negative consequences to their health if they are misunderstood, but also endure humiliation, fear of speaking up, and loss of confidence in their health care. This is more than just being able to tell the doctor where it hurts, but also about how to take medication, how

to care for my wellbeing and what is the doctor's role in my care. It is difficult enough for an English speaking person to understand exactly what to do in case of an illness, but for a limited-English proficient person it is helplessness – the worst feeling possible.

Our Language Ambassadors and Interpreters



Speaking Engagements

Our Language Ambassadors, whose stories are presented here, are credible spokespersons to the issue of culturally and linguistically competent care. Each Language Ambassador has participated in a public speaking and advocacy training and is prepared to speak to print and electronic media at various press conferences, to community groups, and to testify at public hearings and town halls. If you are interested in having a Language Ambassador share his/her story at your event or to your community, please contact PALS for Health at (213) 553-1818. We would be happy to secure an interpreter to assist in the presentation.



PALS for Health

PALS for Health provides:

- Health care interpretation
- Full service written translation
- Language proficiency assessment
- Health care interpreter training
- Patient education on language rights
- Cultural trainings for health care providers

Mission Statement

To improve the health care system's understanding and support of limited English proficient (LEP) patients and families; to increase its capacity to provide quality interpretation/translation services; and to inform LEP patients and families of their right to these services and how to access them.

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The California Endowment

CARE 1st Health Plan

County of Los Angeles, Department of Health Services, Office of AIDS Programs & Policy

Having Our Say Coalition

Susan G. Komen Breast Cancer Foundation,

Los Angeles County Affiliate

National Cancer Institute

Weingart Foundation

PALS for Health is often the last resort for Limited-English Proficient individuals who are denied interpreters by their health care provider. Please help us provide no-cost interpretation services to LEPs by sponsoring an interpreting appointment (or portion of an appointment).

\$10 (15 minute telephone call) \$70 (two-hour appointment)

\$35 (one-hour appointment) Other Amount: _____

Please make your check payable to PALS for Health/SSG. (Tax ID 95-171-6914)

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Thank you for your support!



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