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THE NEED FOR ALTERNATIVE SOLUTIONS WHEN CARING FOR PATIENTS WITH LANGUAGE BARRIERS

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Barriers to quality communication increase the risk for misunderstanding, negatively impact the thoroughness of health investigations, and can lead to delayed diagnoses and increased readmissions. In addition, language barriers disproportionately affect the most vulnerable populations; thus, a lack of appropriate interpretation services promotes health disparities and increases the vulnerability of the underserved minority populations. According to the Act Respecting Health Services and Social Services of Quebec, health organizations need to take into account the distinctive linguistic and sociocultural characteristics of each region and, “foster [...] access to health services and social services through adapted means of communication for persons with functional limitations”.

A language barrier is a form of functional limitation that patients face when accessing healthcare services. Despite a clear policy, the current use of professional interpretation services is limited in our healthcare

facilities, thus increasing obstacles in accessing healthcare services for patients with language barriers. It is thought that by identifying how language barriers present in our healthcare system and by highlighting the tools available to mitigate their consequences, healthcare workers, including medical students, may be better placed to serve the non-French and non-English speaking community.

A group of medical students from the Universities of Montreal and McGill who are part of MedComm researched the problematic, most specifically in Montreal, in the hopes of emphasizing the need for alternative solutions to the current state of affairs in regard to offering optimal care to patients with language barriers. ■