

Meeting language barriers in doctor-patient-communication: Interpreter assignments to children in Switzerland

Mueller F^{1,2}, Borner S^{1,3}

¹PICTOMED, Zürich, Switzerland; ²Pädiatrie/Intensivstation/Neonatologie, Ostschweizer Kinderspital, St. Gallen, Switzerland; ³Privatklinik für Psychiatrie und Psychotherapie, Clenia Schlössli AG, Oetwil am See, Switzerland



Background

Effective communication between displaced persons and healthcare professionals is fundamental to deliver equitable high-quality care. Interpretation by minors, family members or acquaintances are in general not acceptable. Especially children may not have sufficient language proficiency (in either language) to act as interpreters.

Aim

- identify, characterise and critically appraise evidence on children acting as informal interpreters for their parents when accessing health care services in Switzerland.

Methods

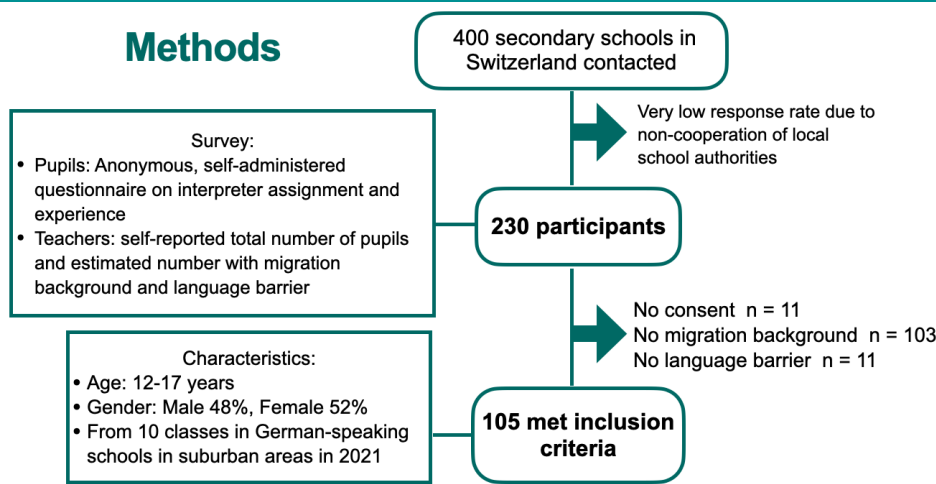
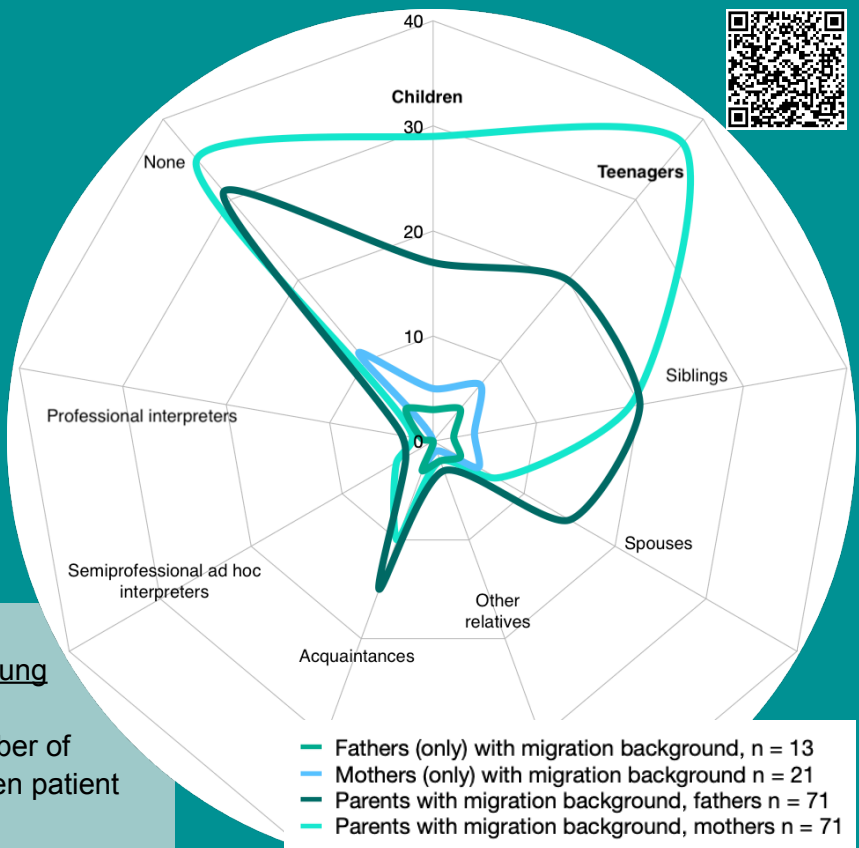


Table and chart: reported interpreter experience

Interpreter experience	For mothers: n = 92	For fathers: n = 84
As child (< 10 years old)	34 (37%)	20 (24%)
As teenagers (> 10 years old)	44 (48%)	24 (28.5%)
with family members	31 (34%)	36 (43%)
with acquaintance	13 (14%)	18 (21%)
with ad hoc interpreter	4	3
with professional interpreter	2	4

Results

- Teenage interpreter assignment was more common than assignment to children.
- Spouses were reported to act as interpreters in 28.6% (30/105), notably 55 case reports involved siblings as interpreters.
- Common setting: outpatient visits to general practitioners, followed by paediatricians and "hospital visits".
- Only about 35% (37/105) of subjects had no experience with intercultural communication, 65% of their parents were bi- or multilingual (24/37).
- (Semi-) Professional interpreter use was poor across all areas.



Conclusion

There is evidence of interpreter assignments to young family members. Limitations included recall and desirability bias, suggesting a high estimated number of unreported cases and signalling a disparity between patient perception and actual existing circumstances.

Conflict of interest: none...since the survey was conducted by PICTOMED, a Swiss non-profit and volunteer-based association, committed to finding solutions to overcome language barriers in doctor-patient-communication.

