

Language Barriers in Community Pharmacy

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Objectives: Exploratory research that sought to identify language barriers that exist between pharmacy staff members and patients with limited English proficiency in Chicago and St. Louis with respect to how it impacts the delivery of care. A questionnaire was used to classify the languages which most commonly present a barrier for pharmacy employees, and to assess the ways in which they are coping with these barriers.

Methods: The combination of language ability maps from the Southern Illinois University - Edwardsville geography department and information from the United States Census Bureau identified a total of 100 pharmacies in the Chicago and St. Louis metro areas. Surveys were manually distributed to pharmacies in both June and September of 2023. The survey contained a total of 10 questions, which included assessments of the most common languages spoken by staff members and their patients, level of comfort communicating, and optimal solutions going forward. Multiple questions, including languages spoken by patients and providers, and the ideal solutions, allowed for respondents to select all that apply.

Results: 103 pharmacy staff members responded to the survey. The geographical distribution of responses was evenly distributed, with 52 from Chicago and 51 from St. Louis. The majority of respondents were either pharmacists, at 48.5% (50), or technicians, at 33.9% (35). Spanish (54.2%), Bosnian (33.9%), Arabic (25.2%), and Polish (21.4%) were the commonly reported patient-spoken languages. In total, 44.7% (46) of respondents indicated they spoke a language other than English fluently. Arabic (17.5%) was the most commonly spoken language by pharmacy staff members, followed by Spanish (7.8%) and Bosnian (6.8%). Additionally, 22.3% (23) of pharmacy employees noted that non-English speaking patients accounted for greater than 50% of their encounters. Although 43.7% (45) of respondents reported comfortability in communicating, 95.1% (98) reported at least some difficulty understanding or being

understood. Going forward, Google translate (61.1%), professional interpreters (59.2%), and providing dual language materials (53.3%) were the most often selected solutions to mitigate language barriers.

Conclusion: The results of this study show that pharmacy staff members in large metropolitan areas frequently encounter a variety of non-English languages, to which they often have difficulties in communication. This exemplifies the need for a multi-faceted approach to improve health outcomes for limited English proficiency patients in community pharmacy settings.