

## **New law keeps all on board**

MADERA -- Margarita García said she used to feel uncomfortable when a doctor explained to her, in English, how to take a medicine or treat a condition.

García, who does not understand English, said she would be embarrassed to ask the doctor for clarification.

"I would be left with doubt," she said in Spanish.

But thanks to a newly implemented law, patients like García will no longer struggle to communicate with their doctors.

The Health Care Language Assistance Act, which went into effect last Wednesday, requires health insurance companies to provide patients with interpreters and translated materials in a timely manner and at all points of contact with health care professionals, at no cost to the patients.

Those interpretation services can be provided through an interpreter, over the phone or by video-conference.

"It is vital, it is important," that patients can understand and communicate with their doctors, said Sandra Pérez, director of the California Office of the Patient Advocate, during a press conference last Wednesday afternoon at the Darin M. Camarena Health Center in Madera.

The law, she said, will "end unnecessary distress and confusion" for people who are trying to access health care. The provision will allow millions of people "equal access to health care treatment," she said.

In California, the first state in the nation to enact such a law, 40 percent of people speak a language other than English at home, according to the U.S. Census. That translates to language barriers and health care obstacles in the doctor's office.

According to the California Pan-Ethnic Health Network, 43 percent of Latinos who primarily speak Spanish reported communication problems with their doctors, compared to 25 percent of those who primarily speak English.

And more than 70 percent of health providers report that language barriers make it more difficult for patients to explain their symptoms, and compromise patients' understanding of their conditions and recommended treatments, increasing the risk of complications, according to the California Pan-Ethnic Health Network.

"California is leading the way" in ensuring that the state health care system is accessible to diverse communities, Martín Martínez, policy director for the California Pan-Ethnic Health Network, said during the press conference.

Though the new law only applies to people who already have health insurance, Martínez said the initiative expands health care by making it "more language accessible."

The interpreter requirement is good news even for health clinics like Central Valley Family Health in Selma, which already boasts bilingual staff members, according to Dr. Victoria Sorlie, a family physician at the clinic.

At the Selma clinic, many of the doctors, medical assistants, nurses, office staff, and medical records personnel speak English and Spanish to ensure clear communication with the patients,

75 percent of whom only speak Spanish.

Sorlie said the new law would come in handy for clinic patients speaking languages besides Spanish or English, like Punjabi or Hmong.

She said it would "cause a minor inconvenience" to find an interpreter for a less common language, but "it's even more important in that case." She added, "you can have catastrophic errors" when doctors don't speak the same language as their patients.

Madera resident Lourdes Herrera was relieved to learn about the new law.

In the past, Herrera said she has felt "helpless" when she could not communicate with her doctors. At times, she said, she has had to wait one or two hours for a bilingual nurse or translator to help her converse with a doctor.

Other times, she said, doctors have used hand gestures to explain how to take medications. Herrera held up three fingers and rubbed her stomach, to demonstrate how she has interacted with doctors in the past.

"It's not a very exact way" of communicating, she said.

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