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Cultural Intelligence as Patient-Safety Infrastructure in Multilingual Healthcare: From Language Access to Human-Centered Clinical Communication

Beatrice de Salles

Chief of Global Affairs, California State Chair, G100 USA

ABSTRACT

Background and Aims: Healthcare is increasingly delivered across languages, cultures, migration histories, health-literacy levels, and different understandings of illness, authority, family, and care. Although health systems have expanded access to professional interpreters, translated materials, digital translation, and artificial intelligence-assisted communication, linguistic accuracy alone does not guarantee clinical understanding. Communication failures may arise even when individual words are translated correctly because meaning is influenced by culture, context, trust, nonverbal behavior, family relationships, and expectations regarding healthcare. This Perspective proposes that cultural intelligence should be considered an important component of communication safety in multilingual healthcare.

Methods: This Perspective integrates evidence and concepts from multilingual healthcare communication, patient safety, cultural competence, health literacy, medical interpreting, and emerging artificial intelligence-mediated communication. It introduces a human-centered framework for considering cultural intelligence alongside language access at critical points in the patient journey.

Results: The proposed framework identifies five interconnected dimensions of culturally intelligent clinical communication: linguistic access, contextual understanding, relational awareness, adaptive communication, and verification of understanding. These dimensions may be particularly relevant during informed consent, diagnosis, medication counselling, discharge, chronic disease management, mental healthcare, and other communication-sensitive encounters. Artificial intelligence may expand multilingual capacity but should not be assumed to recognize cultural meaning or replace qualified human interpretation in high-risk clinical interactions.

Conclusion: Language access should be understood as more than translation. Healthcare organizations should consider cultural intelligence, professional language services, plain-language communication, and verification of patient understanding as complementary components of communication safety. Future research should evaluate whether culturally intelligent communication interventions improve measurable patient-safety and health outcomes across diverse healthcare environments.

***Corresponding author**

Beatrice de Salles, Chief of Global Affairs, California State Chair, G100 USA.

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Introduction

A patient can hear every word of a medical conversation and still leave without fully understanding what has happened. This problem becomes particularly important when healthcare crosses linguistic and cultural boundaries. A clinician may communicate through an interpreter, a hospital may provide translated discharge instructions, and a digital system may convert one language into another with impressive speed. Yet none of these measures alone guarantees that the patient and clinician have constructed the same meaning.

Healthcare communication is not simply the transfer of information. It is an interaction shaped by language, culture, expectations, trust, relationships, previous experiences, health literacy, and the circumstances in which illness occurs. Language differences have long been recognized as potential barriers to healthcare quality and safety. Communication-sensitive safety events may include medication errors and other adverse events, and recent research continues to identify important gaps in the evidence concerning patients who experience language barriers [1,2]. At the same time, cultural differences may influence how symptoms are described, how pain is communicated, who participates in decisions, how authority is perceived, whether sensitive information is disclosed, and how patients understand diagnosis, disability, mental health, prognosis, treatment, and death. The Central Argument of this Perspective is therefore Straightforward: Language access is necessary, but language access without cultural understanding may still leave clinically important meaning untranslated. Cultural intelligence should consequently be examined not merely as a desirable interpersonal characteristic but as a potential component of patient-safety infrastructure.

From Translation to Understanding

Healthcare systems commonly conceptualize language access through mechanisms such as professional interpreters, bilingual staff, translated written information, telephone interpreting, video interpretation, and increasingly automated translation.

These Services are Essential

The World Health Organization emphasizes the importance of communicating in familiar languages and adapting information to audiences so that health information can be understood and acted upon [3]. Yet translation and understanding are not identical. Consider a clinician asking a patient whether a treatment plan is understood. The patient may answer affirmatively because challenging a physician is uncomfortable within the patient's social or cultural expectations. Another patient may avoid discussing mental-health symptoms because the available terminology carries stigma within the family. A relative may answer questions for an older patient because family-centered decision-making is expected. A patient may describe pain metaphorically rather than numerically. Another may interpret silence as respect while a clinician interprets it as agreement.

None of these situations can necessarily be solved by literal translation.
The clinically relevant question therefore changes from:
"Was the information translated?"
To: "Was clinically meaningful understanding achieved?"
That distinction is fundamental.

Cultural Intelligence as a Clinical Communication Capability

Cultural competence has been extensively discussed within healthcare education. Systematic reviews suggest that cultural-competence interventions can improve professional knowledge, attitudes, skills, and some aspects of patient experience, although evidence connecting such training directly to patient health outcomes remains limited and heterogeneous [4-7].

This evidence gap is important. It suggests that healthcare should move beyond treating culture as information that professionals simply acquire about particular populations. No clinician can memorize every cultural tradition, belief, language, migration history, family structure, or communication convention encountered in modern healthcare. Cultural intelligence offers a complementary way of thinking. Rather than assuming that a professional must "know" another person's culture, culturally intelligent practice emphasizes the capacity to recognize when cultural or contextual differences may be affecting an interaction, remain curious rather than assuming, and adapt communication appropriately. In Healthcare, this means replacing assumptions with questions.

Instead of presuming who should make a decision, clinicians can ask whom the patient wants involved. Instead of assuming silence means consent, they can verify understanding. Instead of assuming a translated term carries an identical meaning, they can explore how the patient understands the diagnosis. Instead of viewing culturally unfamiliar behavior as resistance or noncompliance, clinicians can investigate the reasoning behind it.

Cultural intelligence, therefore, should not become another mechanism for categorizing patients. Its clinical value lies precisely in doing the opposite: recognizing variability within cultural groups and creating space for the individual patient to explain what matters.

A Five-Dimension Framework for Culturally Intelligent Communication

I propose five interconnected dimensions for considering cultural intelligence within multilingual clinical communication.

Linguistic Access

The first requirement is straightforward: patients must have meaningful access to communication in a language they understand. Qualified medical interpreters remain essential, particularly during complex or high-risk encounters. Family members and untrained bilingual individuals cannot automatically be assumed to provide equivalent interpretation. Language preference should be identified consistently and incorporated into clinical workflows rather than rediscovered during each encounter.

Contextual Understanding

Words exist within cultural and social contexts. Clinicians should recognize that concepts such as illness, disability, autonomy, mental health, suffering, caregiving, prognosis, and death may carry different meanings across communities and individuals. Contextual understanding does not require clinicians to become anthropologists. It requires recognition that biomedical terminology represents only one framework through which patients may understand their experiences.

Relational Awareness

Healthcare communication occurs within relationships. Culture may influence perceptions of authority, gender, age, family responsibility, eye contact, emotional expression, privacy, and decision-making. For some patients, healthcare decisions are highly individual. For others, family participation is central. Culturally intelligent communication asks rather than assumes.

A simple question—"Who would you like involved in decisions about your care?"—can provide more clinically useful information than generalized assumptions about a patient's cultural background.

Adaptive Communication

Recognizing difference without adapting communication accomplishes little. Clinicians need the capacity to modify vocabulary, pacing, explanation, questioning, use of interpreters, written information, visual aids, and communication style according to the patient's needs. Plain language is particularly important. The World Health Organization emphasizes that health information should use familiar words, prioritize essential information, and be organized so that nonexpert audiences can understand and act upon it [8]. Adaptation should not mean simplifying medicine. It means making medical complexity understandable.

Verification of Understanding

The final dimension may be the most clinically important. Communication should not be considered successful simply because information has been delivered. Understanding must be verified.

Approaches such as teach-back can help determine whether patients understand medication instructions, follow-up requirements, warning signs, or treatment plans. When interpretation is involved, verification should focus on the patient's understanding rather than simply confirming that the interpreter transmitted the clinician's words. The relevant endpoint is not communication delivered. It is communication understood.

Cultural Intelligence and Patient Safety

Why should this framework matter to health-science researchers? Because communication is not merely a patient-experience issue. It can become a safety issue. A misunderstood dosage can become a medication error. A culturally misunderstood description of symptoms can contribute to an incomplete clinical history. An incorrectly assumed family role can interfere with informed decision-making. A patient who does not understand discharge instructions may fail to recognize warning signs. A patient who does not feel safe discussing a stigmatized condition may withhold clinically relevant information. A 2025 scoping review examining patient-safety events and language barriers identified 22 studies and concluded that patients experiencing language barriers appeared vulnerable to communication-sensitive events, although findings varied considerably and important research gaps remain [2].

This uncertainty itself deserves attention. Healthcare systems frequently measure whether interpreter services were offered or used, but the more consequential outcome may be whether communication resulted in shared understanding. Future research should therefore evaluate communication quality at the level of clinical outcomes.

The Artificial Intelligence Question

Artificial intelligence introduces both possibilities and complications. AI-supported translation could potentially expand access to multilingual information, particularly where human language resources are scarce. Technologies may assist with preliminary translation of educational materials, administrative communication, navigation, and other lower-risk functions. However, fluent output should not be confused with clinically reliable understanding. Recent scholarship on AI-mediated medical interpreting has highlighted concerns involving accuracy, privacy, linguistic variation, culturally embedded meaning, low-resource languages, and the potential consequences of replacing professional interpretation with automated systems [9]. This distinction becomes especially important during informed consent, emergency medicine, psychiatric assessment, end-of-life discussions, medication counseling, disclosure of serious diagnoses, and other conversations in which ambiguity can have substantial consequences. AI may translate a sentence. It cannot be assumed to know what that sentence means within a patient's family, cultural history, emotional state, or understanding of illness. For this reason, the most promising model may not be AI instead of human communication, but carefully governed AI supporting human communication. Technology can increase capacity. Human judgment must remain responsible for meaning.

Implications for Healthcare Organizations

If culturally intelligent communication is treated as part of patient safety, responsibility cannot rest exclusively on individual clinicians. Healthcare organizations should consider communication infrastructure at the systems level. This could include systematic documentation of preferred language; timely access to qualified interpreters; multilingual and plain-language patient information; culturally responsive communication education; protocols for high-risk interpreted encounters; mechanisms for verifying understanding; and evaluation of communication-related safety events. Training should also move beyond lists of cultural characteristics.

Healthcare professionals would benefit from learning how to recognize uncertainty, ask culturally responsive questions, work effectively with interpreters, identify assumptions, communicate through disagreement, and verify understanding. The goal is not mastery of every culture. The goal is adaptive clinical communication.

A Research Agenda

The proposition advanced here should be tested rather than simply accepted. The literature demonstrates an important limitation: cultural-competence education often improves provider-level outcomes, while evidence of measurable effects on patient health outcomes remains substantially weaker [4-7]. Future research should therefore examine whether culturally intelligent communication interventions influence outcomes such as medication errors, informed-consent comprehension, adherence, missed appointments, avoidable emergency utilization, readmissions, Patient-Reported understanding, diagnostic delays, trust, and communication-related adverse events. Multicentre studies across different linguistic and cultural environments would be particularly valuable.

Researchers should also distinguish between language concordance, professional interpretation, automated translation, health literacy, and cultural intelligence rather than treating them as interchangeable variables.

AI Creates Another Research Priority

Clinical translation technologies should be evaluated not solely according to linguistic accuracy benchmarks but according to clinically meaningful outcomes: Does the patient understand? Is critical information preserved? Are culturally embedded meanings recognized? Are errors detectable? Can clinicians identify when human interpretation is required? These questions connect technological performance to patient safety.

Conclusion

The future of multilingual healthcare will not be solved by translation alone. Healthcare systems are becoming simultaneously more global, more linguistically diverse, and more technologically mediated. These developments create an opportunity to reconsider what successful clinical communication actually means. Language access remains fundamental. Professional interpreters remain essential. Plain language matters. AI may provide useful additional tools. But communication becomes clinically meaningful only when information is transformed into understanding. Cultural intelligence provides a framework for recognizing the space between those two outcomes.

Rather than viewing cultural intelligence as an optional interpersonal skill, healthcare organizations and researchers should investigate its role as part of communication safety: the ability to recognize difference, question assumptions, adapt communication, preserve human context, and verify that meaning has actually been shared. In multilingual healthcare, the safest question may therefore no longer be simply: "Did we translate it?" It may be: "Did we understand one another?"

Key Points

- **What is known:** Language barriers and communication failures can affect healthcare quality and patient safety.
- **What is new:** Cultural intelligence is proposed as a complementary patient-safety framework linking language access, contextual understanding, relational awareness, adaptive communication, and verification of understanding.
- **Clinical implication:** Healthcare systems should evaluate successful multilingual communication by patient understanding and clinically relevant outcomes, not solely by whether translation was provided.

Ethics Statement
This article is a Perspective and does not report research involving human participants, human biological material, or identifiable patient data. Ethical approval was therefore not required.

Consent
Not applicable.

Conflicts of Interest
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Data Availability Statement
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Author Contributions
Beatrice De Salles: Conceptualization; Interpretation Of Literature; Development Of The Proposed Framework; Writing—Original Draft; Writing—Review And Editing.

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