

CASE STUDIES: Professional Situations (Various Settings)

Situation

A professional interpreter gets caught in traffic and realizes that she will be ten minutes late for an assignment at a doctor's office. What should the interpreter do? Why?

Ethical principles involved

- Professionalism – In the US, it is considered very unprofessional to be late for an assignment.

Options

1. As soon as the interpreter realizes that she is going to be late, she can call, apologize and explain that she is on her way.
 - Pros: The patient and doctor will know that she is on her way. They will know that she values punctuality even though she will not be there on time.
 - Cons: The interpreter has to stop to make the call, meaning that she will arrive even later. The later she is, the more inconvenient it is for those waiting for her. Calling to say that you are going to be late is awkward and embarrassing.
2. She can wait until she arrives, and then apologize for being late.
 - Pros: She will get there faster if she does not stop to call. The doctor and patient will know that she values punctuality even though she arrived late.
 - Cons: It's awkward and embarrassing to apologize. Her in-person apology will take even more time away from the appointment which is already starting late. The client might have assumed that since she was not there on time, she was not coming at all. They might have already called another interpreter or even postponed the appointment until another day.
3. She can wait until she arrives and check out the situation. Maybe someone else was late, and they had to start late anyway. If no one mentions that she was late, she can act as though nothing is wrong.
 - Pros: She avoids embarrassment. The appointment can begin as soon as she arrives, without wasting any more time.
 - Cons: Participants may not say anything, but this doesn't mean they are not annoyed. They may not call her again because they do not think that she is very professional.

Recommended course(s) of action

- As soon as the interpreter realizes that she is going to be late, she should call, apologize and explain that she is on her way. She should offer a quick apology again when she arrives, so that everyone knows she is sorry.
- If she can't reach the parties who are waiting for her to interpret, she will have to wait until she arrives to apologize.

Situation

A professional interpreter interprets for a social worker and the social worker's client. After the appointment is over the client stops the interpreter in the hall and asks what he is supposed to do with the food stamps the social worker gave him.

Ethical principals involved

- Role boundaries – Professional interpreters do not provide counsel or give advice, even if asked to do so.
- Accuracy – The interpreter may not know enough about food stamps.

Options

1. Ignore the Code of Ethics and explain how to use the food stamps.
 - Pros: This will take less time than trying to find the social worker so that the client can ask directly. The client will be grateful for the interpreter's advice. The social worker will be grateful that he was not called out of another meeting.
 - Cons: The interpreter may get the facts wrong and cause misunderstandings. The social worker will never know that he did not adequately explain food stamps to the client. The client will think it's ok to ask interpreters for information and advice.
2. Explain to the client that interpreters are not allowed to answer questions. Then go with the client to find someone else in the building who can answer the question, and interpret for them.
 - Pros: The interpreter is adhering to the Code of Ethics.
 - Cons: This takes time and the interpreter may be late for the next appointment. The client may not get the correct information from the other person. The social worker may never find out that he did not adequately explain food stamps to the client.
3. Explain to the client that interpreters are not allowed to answer questions. Then go with the client to find someone who can find the social worker and ask him to come back to explain how to use food stamps.
 - Pros: The interpreter is adhering to the Code of Ethics. Other people in the office know that the client doesn't understand something, and they are now responsible for making sure that the client gets the correct information.
 - Cons: This takes time and the interpreter may be late for the next appointment.
4. Explain to the client that interpreters are not allowed to answer questions, and tell the client that she can ask the social worker at their next appointment.
 - Pros: The interpreter is adhering to the Code of Ethics. The interpreter does not have to stay longer to help the client.
 - Cons: The client leaves the appointment confused, frustrated and not knowing how to use the food stamps.

Recommended course(s) of action

- Explain to the client that interpreters are not allowed to answer questions. Then go with the client to find someone who can find the social worker and ask him to come back to explain how to use food stamps.
- If you cannot stay to interpret, go with the client to find someone who can help. Explain the situation to the other person and tell them that you cannot stay to interpret because you have another assignment.

Situation

A professional interpreter is interpreting for a patient in a hospital. The doctor comes in to talk to the patient and her husband about the patient's surgery the next day. The patient's husband does not get there until after the doctor is gone. He stops the interpreter in the hallway to ask what the doctor said.

Ethical principals involved:

- Confidentiality – Professional interpreters do not reveal any information about an assignment.
- Accuracy and completeness – It is not likely that the interpreter will be able to remember everything that was said between the patient and the doctor.
- Role boundaries – The husband will probably have questions that the interpreter cannot answer.

Options

1. Ignore the Code of Ethics and summarize what the doctor told the man's wife.
 - Pros: It makes the interpreter feel good to be able to help the man. The sick wife won't have to repeat everything to her husband.
 - Cons: The interpreter is breaking the Code of Ethics. The interpreter may forget something or get something wrong. The wife may have said things to the doctor that she would not have said if the husband had been there. The man may have questions that the interpreter can't answer. The wife and doctor may accuse the interpreter of breaking confidentiality.
2. Offer to go with the husband to the nurse's station to see if the doctor is still around, and tell him that you will stay to interpret.
 - Pros: The interpreter is adhering to the Code of Ethics. The hospital is now responsible for sharing the information with the husband.
 - Cons: This takes time and the interpreter may end up late for another assignment. The doctor may not be available. The husband may never get the information he missed.
3. Explain to the husband that the information is confidential, you are not allowed to share it with anyone, you can't remember what was said, and you have to go to another assignment.
 - Pros: The interpreter is adhering to the Code of Ethics. The interpreter can get on to the next assignment.
 - Cons: The husband may get very upset and even angry with the interpreter and everyone else.

Recommended course(s) of action

- Offer to go with the husband to the nurse's station to see if the doctor is still around, and tell him that you will stay to interpret.
- If you cannot stay to interpret, offer to go with the husband to the nurse's station and explain the situation to the nurse saying that unfortunately you have to leave for another assignment.

Situation

A professional interpreter is called to interpret for a court case. When she gets there, she finds out that the defendant in the case is her ex-boyfriend.

Ethical principles involved

- Neutrality – Even if the interpreter believes that she can be neutral, there is a perception of conflict of interest.

Options

1. The interpreter can stay to interpret and not mention that she knows the defendant.
 - Pros: The interpreter may be able to get revenge. She will get paid for the assignment.
 - Cons: The interpreter is ignoring the Code of Ethics. If anyone finds out, it may ruin her reputation as a professional.
2. The interpreter can tell the judge that she has a conflict of interest in the case and that she cannot accept the assignment.
 - Pros: The interpreter is adhering to the Code of Ethics and protecting her reputation.
 - Cons: The interpreter will probably not get paid for coming to the courthouse because she is not interpreting, and it is too late to get another assignment for this timeslot.

Recommended course(s) of action

- The interpreter must ask to be excused because of a conflict of interest.
- She does not need to explain what the conflict is.

Situation

A professional interpreter is interpreting for a male doctor and a female patient. At the end of the appointment the doctor asks the patient if she has any questions. The patient responds that she does not have any questions. The interpreter doesn't know whether the patient has questions or not, but the interpreter does know that in the patient's culture it is considered inappropriate for a female patient to ask a doctor questions.

Ethical principles involved

- Cultural bridging – If the interpreter feels that there is a lack of communication because of a cultural difference, it may be appropriate for the interpreter to call attention to this.
- Role boundaries – At the same time, the interpreter is expected to refrain from personal involvement in the encounter.

Options

1. Before the doctor leaves, the interpreter can tell the doctor that women in the patient's culture are uncomfortable asking questions, and hope that the doctor will then encourage the patient to ask questions.
 - Pros: This may give the patient the "permission" she needs to ask questions. The doctor will learn something about the culture that will be helpful to know in the future.
 - Cons: The patient may have understood everything perfectly well. If she does not have a problem asking questions, she may be insulted by the interpreter's comments.
2. After the encounter is over, the interpreter can explain to the doctor that the patient may have been uncomfortable about asking questions because of cultural issues.
 - Pros: The doctor will learn something about the culture that will be helpful to know in the future. The interpreter will feel good about sharing cultural knowledge.
 - Cons: It's too late for this to help the patient if she did have questions.
3. The interpreter can refrain from saying anything and hope that the patient didn't have any questions.
 - Pros: The interpreter is sure that he or she stayed within the role boundaries in the Code of Ethics.
 - Cons: The interpreter may have missed an opportunity to "educate" the doctor about the culture and to help the patient become more Americanized.

Recommended course(s) of action

- Since the patient appeared to understand everything, the interpreter should not bring the issue up at this time.
- If the interpreter feels strongly that this cultural difference is likely to cause misunderstandings between patients and doctors in the future, the interpreter can bring it up to patients and providers in future pre-sessions.