

Language Access Tool Kit Offers Practical Strategies

BY DOUG BRUNK
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A new guide produced by the California Academy of Family Physicians aims to bridge the gap between physicians and patients with limited English proficiency.

"Nationwide—but particularly in states like California, New York, Texas, Florida, Nevada, and Georgia—we are experiencing record increases in the number of limited-English-speaking patients," Alice Chen, M.D., medical director of the general medicine clinic at San Francisco General Hospital, told this newspaper. "In some of those states, the number tripled between the 1990 and 2000 census."

The document, "Addressing Language Access in Your Practice: A Toolkit for Physicians and Their Staff Members," aims "to focus on the practical things that you can do in your clinic, and it gives you a whole range of options depending on the size of your clinic, the type of patient population you have, and your resources," said Dr. Chen, who helped develop the guide.

Written by Cynthia E. Roat, author of a training guide for medical interpreters in

the United States, the tool kit is organized into three steps meant to help physicians coordinate and implement a solution to potential language barriers in their practices.

► Step 1: Identify your limited-English-proficiency patient population.

► Step 2: Locate relevant resources in your area, and assess them for your practice.

► Step 3: Implement the right mix of services for your practice and patient population. The guide gives examples of ways to do this, as well as a case study illustrat-

ing the steps one primary care practice took to improve care of patients who speak limited English.

The tool kit also includes sample language-access policies and procedures and a sample job description for a bilingual staff interpreter.

"The important thing is to provide quality care to patients that do not speak English," said Eric Ramos, M.D., a family physician in Modesto, Calif., who helped develop the guide. "Many of us use children or sig-

nificant others as translators. Most of the time it works out well if it's an adult—a friend or family member. But a lot of times we'll use children, which is probably not the most appropriate way to get information," noted Dr. Ramos, current president of the California Academy of Family Physicians.

The California Endowment provided financial support for the guide. ■

The tool kit can be downloaded free at www.familydocs.org/ALA_toolkit.pdf.

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