

Difficulties Accessing Health Services as an Immigrant/Refugee

People are coming to Canada and more recently to Brandon, Manitoba, from all walks of life and from different continents around the world. These people have their own language, culture, and way of life, values and perspectives. The need for culturally sensitive health services is increasing in our immigrant community as this population grows rapidly.

Language barrier is still the number one problem that immigrants and service providers are struggling with. This difficulty impacts immigrants' every day life. Can you imagine being in the dark about your health condition because you are unable to communicate or do not speak the same language as your doctor or service provider? This miscommunication can be confusing and misleading and might result in misdiagnosis. Even if the right diagnosis is given, there is still a possibility of misunderstanding the medication and treatment in general. As well, there is lack of timely attention from service providers for people who are waiting for the availability of a "friend" who is willing and able to interpret for them.

Service providers are in a frustrating situation as they are not able to fully assist the immigrant population because of the language obstacle. Materials translated in different languages and employing people who are professionally trained to provide translation and interpretation services are two solutions. Much more work needs to be done in this area.

Aside from this language barrier, there are cultural differences that occur when blending so many people from different countries and different cultural backgrounds. In some cultures, there are certain topics that are frowned upon and are considered "taboo" to be openly discussed. Even the gender of the physician that the immigrant/ refugee is working with could be a cultural issue. Some women will only agree to be examined by a female physician and some men only by a male physician.

In some cultures, birth control issues are left to the women and men don't even ask questions about it. The men believe that contraception is the responsibility of women and they don't want to discuss the issue. In this case, to be culturally sensitive, the men could be educated about "manly" options that are available.

The religious beliefs of several of our newcomer populations are different from the traditional Canadian beliefs. In some religions, it is considered a sin to talk about sex and sexuality. They would forbid their children from discussing the issue as well. So sexual health education presents more challenges in delivering those messages to these populations.

We are all becoming more aware of the cultural, religious and language differences. We all have to work on these differences to create a middle ground that both service providers and the immigrant communities can agree on. Conducting educational sessions for immigrants to familiarize them with health services that are available and inviting service providers to participate will create the means to narrow the gap that exists between services needed and services provided to the immigrant/refugee communities in Brandon.

Having a truly healthy City of Brandon starts with having health services accessible to all our population, not just to those who can speak the language of the health service providers.

Christian Chavez and Abeba Abebe are Cultural Facilitators at 7th Street Health Access Centre, assisting individuals from the Spanish and Amharic speaking populations, to increase their access to health services in general, and in particular, to provide sexual health information, in a culturally sensitive manner, and in their first language. To contact Christian or Abeba, please call 578-4814.