

# The Asian Reporter

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**MY TURN**

■ **Dmae Roberts**



## The importance of medical interpreters

Last year when I was working on the “Migrations” arts series, I interviewed Dilip Sunar and his wife Harka about their experiences as Bhutanese-Nepali refugees in the United States. During the process, it became apparent to me that they had experienced health issues during their time in a Nepal refugee camp.

Even though they had lived in Bhutan for generations, more than 100,000 Bhutanese-Nepali people were expelled from the country because they wanted to maintain their own culture and language. They were then forced to live in unsanitary conditions in refugee camps in Nepal. In 2008, many countries, including the United States, recognized the refugee status of the Bhutanese people.

The Sunar family came to Portland in 2009. Now in his 60s, Dilip is unable to walk and he has diabetes, asthma, and other health problems from the years he spent in the refugee camp.

During our interviews, the Sunars asked me about some of Dilip’s prescription medications, because he was feeling many side effects such as sleeplessness and acid reflux. They also wondered about his current diet, which included American food. Dilip did not realize that consuming starchy carbohydrates such as white bread and white rice could increase his blood sugar levels.

I offered to do some online research about Dilip’s medications and nutrition. After about a week, I returned with printouts of the drug information I found and hoped that members of his family could translate it. I left feeling unsure if I’d been much help.

This wasn’t an unfamiliar feeling. As the daughter of a Taiwanese immigrant, I learned early about the challenging responsibility of trying to explain large medical terms to my mother, who did not understand them. It’s difficult enough to understand doctors when you’re both speaking the same language. For an immigrant or refugee, it becomes an even more arduous task to manage one’s health.

After this experience, I wondered about medical interpretation in Oregon. An online search revealed several organizations that specialize in medical interpreting, but to many, locating an actual list of local interpreters and languages can be a labyrinthine process.

Soon, I visited the Immigrant and Refugee Community Organization’s (IRCO) International Language Bank, which is managed by Vanloeu

Ping. Ping told me the program has more than 360 interpreters/translators representing 150 languages who can perform written translation and spoken interpretation in person, over the phone, or via video conferencing throughout Oregon.

Ping mentioned that relying on family members for interpretation can complicate a medical situation, and sometimes, a patient does not receive the full story. In the case of a serious illness, Ping said relatives often hide some information from the patient so he or she doesn’t feel bad. She said cultural traditions keep people from revealing details about the situation as well.

This situation happened to Ping as a youth, when her father was placed in hospice care and she felt she had to soften the blow when she was interpreting for him and her family. She later learned as an adult that it is inappropriate to hide medical information from a loved one. It is a time when it’s very important and necessary to have an impartial medical interpreter in attendance to explain all the facts presented by the patient’s medical professionals.

Medical interpretation for patients is often paid for by health insurance, Medicare, or Medicaid. IRCO offers in-person interpretation to businesses and nonprofit organizations for \$30 to \$60 per hour, depending on the need and demands of the interpreter. Phone and/or video conferencing are also available and have different rates.

According to Ping, IRCO’s interpreters receive training based on national standards of practice for healthcare interpreters. There are two different certification levels: “Qualified Healthcare Interpreter” and “Certified Healthcare Interpreter.” Each level requires 60 hours of training and varying amounts of documented interpreting experience.

Ping said IRCO’s International Language Bank is always seeking to train new interpreters, especially in languages that aren’t well represented. The organization recently received funding to prepare 150 healthcare interpreters across Oregon to meet the requirements to become qualified or certified through the Oregon Health Authority.

IRCO provides modular training in eight-hour sessions, which cost \$40 per session. Upcoming trainings take place May 26 through 29 as well as May 30 and 31. To learn more about interpreter requirements and training, or to request a medical interpreter, call Vanloeu Ping at (971) 271-6480, e-mail <vanloeuun@irco.org>, or visit <www.ilb.irco.org>.