The Bilingual Endorsement Program for Physician Assistants

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE:

Large Limited English Proficiency (LEP) Population in Illinois Results in High Rates of Medical Interpretation Error: Bilingual Physician Assistants Desperately Needed

Chicago, IL, USA-May 4, 2011- Over twenty-two million Americans have limited English Proficiency, as known as LEP. In 2007, the United States Census Bureau reported that 2,603,244 people in Illinois spoke a language other than English at home, while 1,177,007 of these spoke English less than "very well." While the number of undocumented individuals immigrating to other states such as Arizona or California has decreased in recent years, in Illinois immigration numbers have continued to steadily increase. These numbers are only expected to increase in the coming years.

Currently, Illinois has no endorsement program for bilingual health care providers like they do for bilingual teachers.

With a lack of bilingual health providers, ad hoc interpreters are utilized, or none at all. However, ad hoc interpreters were found to average about 31 errors per clinical encounter, with 52% of these accounting for omission errors, 16% accounting for false fluency, 13% accounting for substitution, 10% accounting for editorialization, and 8% accounting for addition errors. Furthermore, 63% of errors result in potential clinical consequences, with 19 such errors occurring per clinical encounter on average. Common errors include omission of questions regarding drug-related allergies and omission of antibiotic instructions.

Furthermore, medical errors associated with language barriers and interpretation errors cost the health care system millions of dollars annually, with one notable case of quadriplegia associated with the misinterpretation of the Spanish term "intoxicado" resulting in a $71 million settlement. Other common legal cases associated with language barriers result from issues of informed consent, discrimination claims, and inadequate documentation errors.

Physician assistants play a critical role in our health care system. They work in a variety of health care settings and are accessible even in underserved regions and to underserved populations. They can reduce waiting times and increase the patient-provider contact time that physicians cannot often provide and even qualified medical interpreters cannot replace.

As a result, The Bilingual Endorsement Program for Physician Assistants (BEPPA) is advocating for the amendment of section 15 of the Physician Assistant Practice Act of 1987. This piece of legislation, which would allow for the endorsement of bilingual licensed physician assistants in the state of Illinois, would help reduce health disparities in LEP Illinois individuals by increasing accessibility to health care resources, which in turn improves the health of Illinois's population overall.

Executive Director of BEPPA, Jessica Szafron, was quoted as saying, "The health of limited English proficiency individuals is not only relevant to those individuals; their health has a direct impact on those around them as well, making their ability to access effective health care services a priority for all of us."

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