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News

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¿Dónde le duele?.....Where does it hurt?

¿Es usted alérgico a alguna medicina?.....Are you allergic to any medicine?

¿Cada cuánto tiempo tiene dolores?.....How far apart are your pains?

These and several hundred other frequently used phrases of the medical profession are contained in a gem of a little book entitled "Tell the Patient in Spanish" by Dr. Berta Savariego.

Because such well-known phrases as "How are you?" and "What time is it?" are not much help in emergency medical situations, a movement is underway to help English-speaking health care professionals communicate with Spanish-speaking patients.

In three pilot classes at Children's Medical Center, Parkland Hospital and The University of Texas Health Science Center at Dallas, Savariego is attempting to streamline bilingual medical communications.

"The problem with many doctors and nurses who need to speak some Spanish is their lack of time. These people are in high-pressure jobs. They have neither the time nor, in many cases, the desire to learn a new language."

But the patient is in a high-pressure situation also. When pain is great and his only form of communication is hand gestures, every second can be an eternity. Lost time could mean the difference between pain and comfort, life and death.

Not a medical doctor, Savariego received her Ph.D. in Spanish literature from Texas Tech. While teaching at the Miami Dade Community College in Florida, she was assigned the task of developing a program of Spanish instruction for the Coral Gables Hospital.

She spent time with every department in the hospital, with every health professional who might come in contact with a patient. Out of her research and efforts came her book, "Tell the Patient in Spanish." It has sections with translations for pre-operative, post-operative, psychiatric, recovery room, admissions, insurance, EKG, radiology, cardiac, physical therapy and virtually every other phase of health care.

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"We are not trying to fully instruct these people in Spanish," says Berta in a pleasing accent. "Grammar is not even an issue in these classes. We only want to teach, by imitation if necessary, the phrases and questions used by health care personnel."

In many areas of the country, explains Savariego, hospital communications breakdown is a real problem. Southern Florida is one example, as are many parts of the Southwest, including Texas.

Jeff Santlofer, a producer-director in UIHSCD Television Services Department, is Savariego's co-worker and one of her great supporters in this endeavor.

"The best part of this program is that anyone can partake and learn some Spanish. In the classroom, Berta doesn't spend time on rules, conjugations, tests or any of the things people hate about learning a new language. She simply teaches what's necessary to get by and help the patient."

With Jeff's experience in television production and with Berta's knowledge of medical Spanish, they hope to design a videotape series for wide distribution.

"There is no time to waste," says Berta. "If we are successful, and if more doctors, nurses and hospital administrators take part in these simple sessions, we can possibly improve the level of care patients receive. People must be able to communicate in medical situations."

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