NSW Multicultural Health Communication Service

Position Statement: Use of machine translation to communicate with culturally and linguistically diverse communities

Introduction

People from culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) backgrounds constitute a significant proportion of the NSW population. Most commonly, CALD populations are described as those people born overseas or have at least one parent born overseas, and speak languages other than English at home. In 2016, 28% of people in New South Wales were born overseas[1] and 25% of people spoke a language other than English at home.[2] Between 2006 and 2016, the largest increases in birthplaces were for China, India, Nepal, and Philippines, Vietnam, and South Korea.[3] There was also an increase in people born in Lebanon.[4]

Background

The use of machine translation is increasing rapidly, in line with its increasing sophistication and accessibility. While recent advances in machine translation may help government services to better support people from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds, they bring the risk of ineffective and inaccurate communication. There is limited evidence for using machine translation apps in health care settings. However published research on the accuracy of machine translations [5,6,7] recognises the variability in the reliability and quality of machine translation; and the quality of translation is poorer for non-European languages.[8,9] Machine translation apps have also been found to be ineffective when translating complex and nuanced information such as in health and legal settings.[10]

NSW Health Policy mandates that: "Health organisations and staff should not use apps or other online machine translation services (such as Google Translate) to translate any health information which is clinical or 'official', as current evidence indicates they are not sufficiently accurate." [11]

Statement

The NSW Multicultural Health Communication Service (MHCS) does not support the use of machine translation to communicate with people from culturally and linguistically diverse communities. This includes the use of Google Translate on government websites and the use of translation apps in health care. MHCS strongly recommends the use of accredited translators to ensure equity of access to accurate information for culturally and linguistically diverse communities.

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1 .idcommunity, demographic resources, available at: https://profile.id.com.au/australia/birthplace?WebID=100&BMID=50

2 .idcommunity, demographic resources, available at: https://profile.id.com.au/australia/language?WebID=100&BMID=50

3 .idcommunity, demographic resources, available at:
https://profile.id.com.au/australia/birthplace?WebID=100&BMID=10&EndYear=2011&DataType=UR

4 .idcommunity, demographic resources, available at: https://multiculturalnsw.id.com.au/multiculturalnsw/birthplace-ntroduction?EndYear=2006&COIID=5014

5 Blay N, Ioannou S, Seremetkoska M, Morris J, Holters G, Thomas V & Bronwyn E, 2018, Health care interpreter utilisation; analysis of health administrative data, BMC Health Services Research, 18:348 https://doi.org/10.1186/s12913-018-3135-5

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