

Dr. Concha Paz goes back to CLAS

Experience is a good teacher. “Sometimes you know what’s the right thing to do, but you don’t know how to do it,” says Concha (Conchita) Paz, MD, when asked about the subject of providing culturally and linguistically appropriate services (CLAS) to clients of FamilyCare Associates, her Las Cruces-based practice. To get help providing these services, she enrolled in the *CLAS for Physicians* project offered by the New Mexico Medical Review Association (NMMRA). The project offers training, consultative services and nine hours of continuing medical education credit at no cost to New Mexico physicians interested in culturally responsive care.

Dr. Paz knows through experience that providing culturally competent care is a conscious effort and she also knows the consequences of failing to do so. As a resident, she observed the problems that can occur when these services are not provided. “The other residents couldn’t speak Spanish so they used me, sometimes the family of the patients, or even the janitor! These were horrible ways of interpreting and there were always problems that caused fear and confusion.” Dr. Paz admits that shared language cannot always resolve communication barriers. “I’m bilingual, but that doesn’t always solve the problem. For example, the Indian population in Mexico has a distinct dialect as do South Americans and I don’t know all the differences. Also, the education level of the patient has to be considered; they might not understand medical terms even if they’ve been translated.”

Dr. Paz feels that engaging her entire staff in culturally responsive care training will increase the quality of care for all her patients. She is pleased to offer the training as a form of professional development. Her participation has been voluntary, and she knows her self-motivation is unusual. “Hospitals have to get in the picture too. It takes government regulation; it takes effort on a national level. It [culturally responsive care] has to be regulated or it’s not going to get done. People have to be trained; it won’t just happen.”

Dr. Paz’s recommendations are becoming reality in some states. New Jersey now mandates cultural competence activity for maintenance of certification. California has passed legislation barring the use of children as interpreters. Malpractice insurance carriers in Arizona, Texas and Colorado offer discounts or point reductions to physicians participating in their state’s CLAS projects. Large health care providers regularly utilize culturally and linguistically appropriate services as a means to increase client satisfaction and decrease malpractice liability claims. The U.S. Department of Health and Human Services’ Office of Minority Health asserts, “Providers can take the first step to improve the quality of health care services given to diverse populations.”

For more information or to join NMMRA’s *CLAS for Physicians* project, please contact Willa Pilár, quality improvement coordinator, at (505) 998-9731 or wpilar@nmqio.sdps.org.

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