Language translation without expense or delay

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Obtaining a history from a patient who is unable to speak English is a common experience. Despite hospitals providing human translators or telephone translation services, there are often situations in which medical staff need to communicate with patients urgently without the delays inherent to these facilities.

Technique

Hospital wards are now provided with mobile workstations. These 'computers on wheels' (CoWs) have the additional benefit of providing bedside internet access. Such devices can be used to rapidly access

Figure 1 A computer on wheels, which can be mobilized to the vicinity of the patient for 'speech-to-speech' instant translation

Figure 2 Google Translate's 'speak to speak' instant translation option

translation services that are freely available. The CoW can be moved to the vicinity of the patient and doctor and patient can then use online 'speech-to-speech' facilities to instantly translate one language into another.

We found ourselves in a life-threatening situation, during which we were unable to communicate promptly with a patient who had presented with stab wounds to the chest at 2am. Using Google Translate (<https://translate.google.co.uk>) via a CoW, we were able to speak Russian with the patient and gain consent for the insertion of a chest drain without delay.

Discussion

Although we do not advocate the use of Google Translate for routine consultations,¹ it can be considered a valuable option during out-of-hours or emergency situations.

Further refinement of automated translation services may enable medical consultations to be performed without the need for expensive human or telephone translation services, which are also prone to translation misinterpretations.

However, for the moment, such services can be considered for life-threatening emergencies in which simple-to-describe interventions are required while waiting for a human translator to arrive.

Reference

1. Patil S, Davies P. Use of Google Translate in medical communication: evaluation of accuracy. *BMJ* 2014; **349**: g7392.