

Our Stories

Interpreter Services as Part of the Care Team

The week of May 1-5, 2023 is Interpreter Appreciation Week, which celebrates and honors the invaluable contributions of the University of Washington Medical Center's Interpreter Services team!

Twenty-four talented professionals represent 12 languages - Spanish, Mandarin, Russian, Vietnamese, Korean, Cantonese, Farsi, Arabic, Amharic, Japanese, Portuguese, and Dari.

The UWMC Interpreters are at the heart of caring for our patients with Limited English Proficiency (LEP) and play a crucial role in advancing equity, diversity, and inclusion (EDI) at the Medical Center. The work of these individuals is not only important in providing medical treatment, they also aid in breaking down language barriers to ensure that patients receive the highest quality care, regardless of their cultural or linguistic background.

At UWMC, we recognize that our patients have diverse needs, and we strive to provide them with exceptional care tailored to their unique circumstances. Our medical interpreters and coordinators are instrumental in achieving this goal.

While the main role of interpreters is to relay information from one language to another, they also serve as intercultural mediators who connect understanding and meaning beyond spoken words.

The Interpreter Services team works behind the scenes to ensure that patients and care teams have the resources to communicate; whether that be through an in-person staff interpreter, an interpreter through a contracted vendor, or a remote resource such as phone or video.

As a continuation of the "Our Stories" series, the University of Washington Medical Center division of Equity, Diversity and Inclusion partnered with Interpreter Services to feature three staff stories. This photo project is a tribute to elevate the work, presence, value, and stories of our interpreters. We acknowledge, respect, and are grateful for their invaluable contributions to our community.



“내 이름은 승미입니다.”

Sungmi Ferrell

Sungmi Ferrell is the Translation Coordinator and has been an Interpreter for the Korean language at UW Medical Center since 2006.

When Sungmi would accompany her mother to her Cardiology appointments at UWMC, she became instantly curious about why and when certain terms like “arrhythmia” would be used, while other providers explained “irregular heartbeat” and the way her mother’s interpreter handled it. This curiosity led her to take two courses in medical terminology and it was her mother’s interpreter who encouraged her to pursue this career.

In her role as an interpreter, Sungmi acknowledges the difficulties of being in the middle. While working with providers and nurses, it can feel like she is a third party and not always a part of the team, and at the same time, the patient knows she works for the hospital and may not fully trust her.

Sungmi does her best to foster this trust, especially when explaining cultural and western medicine differences. For example, a new Korean mother was surprised when they were encouraged to drink ice water or to take a shower postpartum. When dealing with medically sensitive topics, Sungmi comforts patients by explaining that they don’t need to be embarrassed to share because she is a professional.

One of the most meaningful comments Sungmi has heard from a patient is, “I feel like I have my voice back,” because through Interpreter Services, the patient was able to finally communicate what they were feeling and thinking.



감사합니다, Sungmi!

“我的名字叫 Simon
(绍文) (or Shaowen)”

Simon Ho

Simon Ho was born in China and has been the Cantonese and Mandarin interpreter for UW Medical Center for three years.

He studied mechanical engineering and received a graduate degree in architecture, and has had a variety of job experiences. It was during his tenure working at a film festival that he enjoyed being a part of cross-cultural exchange, and that prompted his interest in becoming an interpreter.

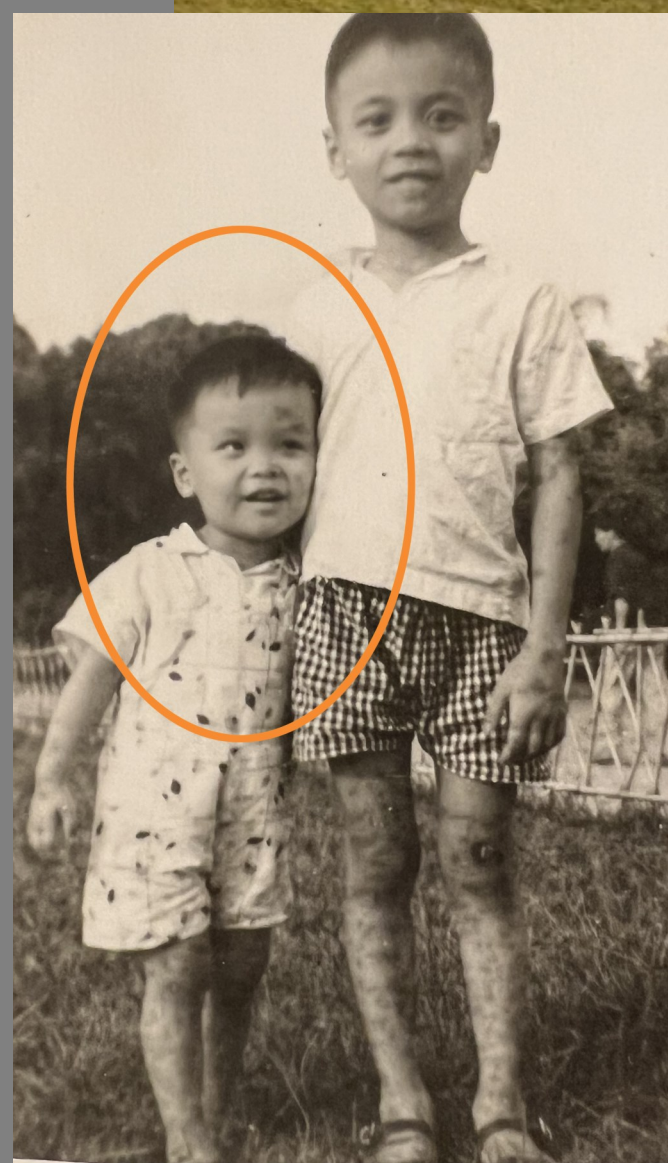
Simon sees himself as “a friend for patients; someone who has had the same experiences and is part of the same culture.” He admits that sometimes, culturally, it is difficult to say no to some requests like providing his direct contact information if they need additional support.

Simon recognizes that family members need equal support during challenging moments when their loved one is sick as it is a distressing time for them as well.

Sometimes family members will say something to Simon when the provider or nurse leaves the room, and he does his best to listen and connect them to additional resources for support as well as consult with the care team about any issues they should know.

Simon feels fulfilled in his role as an interpreter because he sees the difference his work makes in the faces of the patients as well as the care teams he works with.

When a patient asks if he can return, Simon feels proud knowing they are satisfied with his work because he has been able to establish rapport and trust.



谢谢, Simon!

“Me llamo Silvia.”

Silvia Funk

Silvia Funk is originally from Colombia. She has over 29 years serving as a Spanish Interpreter and 9 of those years at UW Medical Center.

Silvia began her career as a manager for a petroleum company and later moved to the US to be with her husband. She began working as a medical assistant and was often being pulled away from her duties to help interpret, so logically, she decided to get certified.

Silvia sees her role more fittingly as a “cultural broker.” In addition to interpretation, she helps patients and providers navigate through cultural norms and assumptions. She shared stories about a patient being surprised at having a male nurse because it wasn’t something she expected or had seen before, or having to explain to a provider about a patient who thinks they are sick due to *el sereno*, a common belief in many Latin American countries of a deadly chill if they aren’t clothed appropriately.

In addition to helping staff and providers, Silvia enjoys continued learning and researching in order to remain current in her work.

In her relationship with providers and staff, Silvia shares that it makes a difference when she is considered a part of the care team.

“A simple ‘hello,’ ‘thank you,’ and offering me a chair, because we are sometimes there for a long time.”



¡Gracias, Silvia!