

UNDERSTANDING MIGRANTS FROM BURMA: SEXUAL HEALTH CONSULTATIONS OR DECIPHERING EUPHEMISMS

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Introduction: When people of dissimilar cultural backgrounds interact with one another in relation to sexual health, miscommunication is a real possibility. However, people who speak the same language may conceptualize their intended meanings differently which can cause language disconnects. The present study aims to critically examine the language used in sexual health consultations and explore the deeper interpretation of migrants from Burma.

Methods: We conducted 25 semi-structured interviews with health practitioners involved with migrants from Burma regarding sexual health. Interviews were audio-recorded, transcribed and subjected to content and thematic analysis independently by research team members to achieve consensus.

Results: Analysis yielded four themes: a) limited reproductive health vocabulary in dialects from Burma b) use of euphemism to increase cultural acceptance of reproductive health terms c) low levels of health literacy requiring improvisation with metaphors for simplification d) deviation of interpreters from conduit roles to practitioner aids, sometimes beyond the practitioners' expectations or desire. For example the word for 'intercourse' in Chin language is "hupa sual nak/nu maw pa sinak" literally meaning "man and woman commit sin" and so the interpreter will use alternative words to increase the cultural acceptance of this term, potentially altering the meaning of the GP's question.

Conclusion: A close look at sexual constructs in an unfamiliar language spotlights the imaginative resources used by interpreters to assist practitioners in understanding the inner world of the patients. The real challenge is for the provider to recognize the conveyed meaning when there is speech shared between the patient and interpreter but the verbatim translation loses the essence of expression. Being aware of the way in which sexual words are viewed by a culture can assist health providers to use more acceptable words and generate greater rapport with the patient.