



An open letter sent to the Health Minister and Shadow Health Minister about the death of a Gloucester mother who tragically died owing to a delay in post-birth treatment and poor interpreting services

9 February 2023

Dear Ministers,

We are compelled to write to you in light of the recent publication and media coverage (www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-england-gloucestershire-64496514) of the Healthcare Safety Investigation Branch's (HSIB) enquiry into the death of Ms Abdelkarim – a Gloucester mother who tragically died shortly following childbirth owing to a delay in post-birth treatment and poor interpreting services.

In its report, the HSIB said: "There was no effective communication with Ms Abdelkarim and the events that occurred traumatised staff".

'Interpretation problems' were highlighted in a report by the Care Quality Commission, following an unannounced inspection of the Gloucestershire Royal NHS Foundation Trust in April 2022.

The family's solicitor said that it was as a result of poor interpretation services that Ms Abdelkarim and her husband did not understand what was happening, which "resulted in a complete breakdown in communication and led, unfortunately, in part to her tragic death."

We are sure you will agree that such a situation should not have occurred and should not be allowed to happen again.

Vulnerable members of the public and public service professionals should never have to rely on poor interpreting services or family members to communicate in life-threatening situations. Not when the National Register of Public Service Interpreters (NRPSI) exists.

Established in 1994 on the recommendation of a Royal Commission, NRPSI is a commercially and politically independent organisation that regulates the UK's public service interpreting profession and manages a free-to-access online register of public service interpreters – all of whom meet its requirements in terms of the level of qualifications, experience, security vetting and professional accountability needed to work in public service settings.

In 2018, NHS England issued guidance for commissioners regarding the use of interpreting and translation services. This guidance was initially written with primary medical care services (GP surgeries) in mind, but NHS England suggested that the contents should be applied to other settings, such as other primary care settings or hospital sites.

The guidance states that organisations must ensure that communication and language professionals hold relevant interpreting qualifications, and that interpreting is a specific skill that requires expertise and training. According to this guidance, spoken language interpreters should be registered with NRPSI and hold a Diploma in Public Sector Interpreting (DPSI) Health.

In spite of the existence of this guidance, poor interpreting services were allowed to infiltrate the system and this horrific event occurred. Guidance alone is not enough. If we are to safeguard the public, our public services and public sector professionals, the use of Registered Interpreters by the public services must be made mandatory.

The Gloucestershire Royal NHS Foundation Trust has claimed it will take every opportunity to understand the factors that might have contributed to such a tragic outcome and to learn and make care as safe as possible, but care cannot be safe for everyone without the mandatory use of registered public service interpreting professionals.

An always accessible, cost-competitive and efficient, high-quality public service interpreting service should be the rule. However, it cannot become the rule unless rules are first established to make it so.

We at NRPSI, on behalf of all members of the public needing interpreting expertise to access public sector services, and all the professional Registrants on the National Register,

would welcome the opportunity to discuss this matter further with you and how we can work with our precious health service to ensure it is always supported by professional interpreting practitioners in its vital work.

Yours faithfully,

Mike Orlov

NRPSI Executive Director and Registrar