

231121 BBC 'File on Four' 8.00pm

## **BBC 'File on Four': Lost in Translation**

**Broadcast at 8.00pm on 21<sup>st</sup> November 2023**

**Repeated at 5pm on 26<sup>th</sup> November 2023**

### **'Poorly managed' NHS interpreting services a contributing factor in the deaths of at least 80 babies, BBC investigation finds**

Interpreting services in the NHS are being described as a "wild west", with staff resorting to online translation tools to deliver serious and devastating news to patients. The National Register of Public Service Interpreters, a voluntary independent regulator for qualified interpreters, has told the BBC's File on 4 programme that "poorly managed" language services in the NHS are "leading to abuse, mis-diagnosis and in the worst cases death of patients."

The episode File on 4: Lost In Translation which will air on Radio 4, Tuesday at 8pm has found interpreting problems were a contributing factor in at least 80 babies dying or suffering serious brain injuries in England between 2018 and 2022. NHS England says it is currently completing a review to identify if and how it can support improvements in the commissioning and delivery of services.

The episode hears from the husband of one woman who died during childbirth and from a woman who was not aware her uterus was removed, as the hospital could not provide an interpreter to deliver the news in person until the next day.

In March 2021 Rana Abdelkarim suffered a fatal bleed after giving birth to her daughter at Gloucestershire Royal Hospital. Rana and her husband Modar arrived in England after fleeing conflict in Sudan, both speaking little English. When they arrived in the UK it was supposed to be a fresh start, a peaceful place to raise a family but problems started when Rana was called to attend the local maternity unit, for what she thought was just a check-up. In fact, Rana was going to be induced, something Modar tells File on 4 he was completely unaware of.

"I don't know what you mean 'induce'. I heard this 'induce', but I don't know what. I don't understand exactly." Modar says he was promised there would be a phone call from the hospital to let him know Rana was ready to give birth, so that he could be there with her. That call never came. Unbeknownst to him Rana had already given birth and then suffered a catastrophic bleed which doctors had been unable to stem. "And they called me and he said to me, 'You have to come hospital very quick'. And then he say, 'listen we try to keep her alive. But she's passed away'.

"The Healthcare Safety Investigation Branch (HSIB) found there were delays in calling for specialist help and there was no effective communication with Rana, who could not speak English, and the events that occurred had traumatised staff. Gloucestershire Royal Hospitals NHS Foundation Trust has apologised.

Modar now looks after his two daughters alone, the youngest of which is named after her mother, Rana. He says better interpreting services would have "help me and will help her, to take the right decision for how she's going to deliver the baby. And at the same time she can know what is going to be happen to her. " The NHS trust told the BBC it had acted on the coroner's recommendations to ensure all lessons have been learned to prevent similar tragedies. It adds that it is absolutely committed to delivering the safest possible service.

Under the 2010 Equalities Act people who don't speak English have the right to be provided with an interpreter when they're dealing with public sector organisations. This can range from help with an asylum application, to social services, to police interviews.

A Freedom of Information Request to HSIB, revealed serious interpretation failures are linked to around 80 babies coming to harm. File on 4 asked HSIB to review all investigations from 2018-2022 that involved cases of babies dying or being diagnosed with a severe brain injury that occurred in the first seven days of life.

Since the BBC submitted its request the Healthcare Safety Investigation Branch has been reformed as the Health Services Safety Investigation Body and the organisation's maternity investigations function is now hosted by the Care Quality Commission. The CQC's Maternity and Newborn Safety Investigations programme (MNSI), said that of the total 2,607 reviewed cases, 80 included references to interpretation or communication problems due to language difficulties in the recommendation section of the report, which it therefore considered to be a contributing factor to the death or brain injury.

MNSI also points out that there may be several contributing factors in any case. The data came as no surprise to Professor Hassan Shehata from the Royal College of Obstetricians and Gynaecologists who says there is a disproportionate risk of poor birth outcomes in women of colour.

Professor Hassan Shehata tells the BBC the service is "failing some of the most vulnerable people in society. Add to that the language barriers, which will further exacerbate the risk with women struggling to access, engage with maternity services and communicate their concerns to healthcare professionals," he said.

Childbirth is one of the most crucial times to have good interpretation services available as mothers need to know when to push and they must be able to communicate their level of pain.

Experts believe failure to communicate can lead to a cascade of intervention that is potentially harmful.

When Rula (not her real name) woke in hospital the day after giving birth to her first child, she was shocked to learn her womb had been removed. She had suffered a life-threatening bleed shortly after the labour at the Princess Royal Maternity Hospital in Glasgow in April 2022. Staff could not get hold of a telephone interpreter for Rula, who is from Syria, and spent 15 minutes using Google Translate to try to make her understand she was going to have to go back to theatre for the emergency operation, before someone could be raised on the phone.

She told the BBC's File on 4: "Sometimes I do understand them, sometimes I couldn't. But I beg them, please don't remove my uterus." When Rula woke the next day an interpreter had been summoned to deliver the devastating news in person.

"Because most interpreting services was provided over the phone, I couldn't understand them. They couldn't understand me." NHS Greater Glasgow and Clyde said a telephone interpreter had been made available throughout her labour but it appreciated this had been "extremely challenging" and it would like to apologise for any concerns she experienced. It added it was "not routine to use face-to-face interpreters due to covid", adding that her claims about her treatment were investigated but not upheld.

Executive director of the The National Register of Public Service Interpreters, Mike Orlov, told the BBC he is concerned that the level of qualifications in the profession varies hugely, making standards "extremely patchy". Mr Orlov has likened the NHS to the 'wild west', where all trusts are encouraged to operate their language service needs independently and there are many instances where family members or friends are deployed in primary care and in hospitals. NHS England said the service was vital for patient safety and that it is currently completing a review to identify if and how it can support improvements in the commissioning and delivery of services. Rula, who had wanted more children, now wishes she had been sent an interpreter the day before. She has been left wondering if it could have made all the difference.

### **Extra info on survey through NRPSI**

File on 4 carried out a survey of nearly 1600 members of the e National Register of Public Service Interpreters to ask them how well they felt the industry as a whole was performing and forty per cent responded.

Out of around 600 complete responses more than half felt interpreting in the public sector was handled quite poorly or very poorly. And half said they had been offered interpreting in languages they were not qualified to work in.