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What Is That Two-Headed Phone?

By Jennifer 8. Lee

Dual-handset phones may be a common sight at the city's pharmacies, as drugstore chains roll out real-time interpretation services under agreements with the New York State attorney general's office reached over the last year.

The phones seem somewhat unnatural — vaguely reminiscent of two-headed monsters in a world where phones in general have been getting sleeker, more portable and increasingly sophisticated. These corded phones are throwback clunkers, like a Cadillac from the 1980s. But they are a necessary reality in a polyglot city in which nearly half of the residents speak a language other than English at home.

At Rite Aid, which is pilot testing the dual-handset phones in 25 stores in Manhattan and the Bronx, the interpretation services are provided by Language Line, which is also used by the Police Department. The phone provided by Language Line has an "Interpreter" speed-dial button (remember speed-dial?), which connects the pharmacist and the customer with an automated voicemail system. ("For Spanish, press 1. For all other languages, press 2.") That leads them to interpreters who sit in 18 time zones around the world. The service offers 175 languages.

All 225 Rite-Aid stores in the city will have access to interpretation services, though in most cases without the dual-handset phone. Before the phone system, translation was more haphazard. "Mostly we relied on our own associates," said Scott Jacobson, the director of pharmacy for Rite Aid.

The ad-hoc approach was criticized by nonprofit groups, which complained that non-native English speakers were running into language barriers in pharmacies.

"Our clients were having trouble getting their medication," said Nisha Agarwal, director for health justice with New York Lawyers for the Public Interest, which first filed a complaint with the civil rights division of the attorney general's office in 2007. Last August, the group released a report titled "Bad Medicine" [pdf], which found dismissive pharmacists and patients who did not take medicine because they were afraid they would get the instructions wrong. "The stories we hear are horrific from clients," Ms. Agarwal said.

The groups argued that under New York State law, pharmacists are personally required to provide patients spoken and written information about the dosage, purpose and side effects of prescription drugs. Pharmacies are also prohibited under both state and federal law from discriminating against non-English speakers. Federal law prohibits pharmacies from discriminating if they receive Medicaid and Medicare (which essentially all of them do).

The conclusion was that even non-native speakers would have to receive spoken and written instructions.

For years, health care providers have tried to find creative solutions to language barriers (including one doctor who called a local Vietnamese restaurant to find a translator). In September 2006, the state's Department of Health set out detailed regulations on hospitals and language policy. Among them was a prohibition against using children as interpreters, because sometimes they were not competent with medical terminology and because domestic violence episodes sometimes created awkward situations for the children.

Hospitals are now required to provide interpreter services within 10 minutes in the emergency room and within 20 minutes in any other part of the hospital.

In addition, other number of advocacy groups have won the right to an interpreter in other contexts, including administrative courts.

The pharmacy chains that have agreed to introduce the phones include Duane Reade, Food Emporium, Costco and Target.

The agreement also requires chains to provide written information about the medication they sell in at least five of the main foreign languages spoken in New York: Spanish, Chinese, Italian, Russian and French. Rite Aid said it was already providing multilingual services, so the discussion with the attorney general's office was relatively amicable. "It became mainly a technicality on our part," Mr. Jacobson said.

With the agreement, New York became the first state to have such a comprehensive policy. Advocacy groups are also lobbying for a city law that would apply to all pharmacy chains with five or more stores, not just the large chains that have reached an agreement. The City Council health committee held a hearing on the matter last week. "We're hopeful that this is something that can move," Ms. Agarwal said.