



## Translated Prescriptions Often Wrong – Half of Automated Spanish Versions Have Errors

Written On May 18, 2010 By [Bob Kraft](#)

This is a problem I never thought about before, but apparently it's a quite serious one — erroneous translations of medication prescriptions for Spanish-speaking patients.

The problem, as reported in the [Chicago Tribune](#), arises when pharmacies with no Spanish-speaking employees fill prescriptions for people who don't speak English. The pharmacies must either go find someone who does speak Spanish, or more likely rely on a computer translation program to write the dosage instructions. Unfortunately, no program is capable of converting all the many possible dosage instructions into the appropriate Spanish phrases.

This is another good reason for immigrants to learn English as soon as possible, but learning any new language as an adult is very difficult. And learning English to the point you could read and understand prescription instructions could take quite some time. Also, at any given time the United States has many thousands of foreigners from many different countries here for short periods of time — tourists, temporary workers, and others. So this problem may not be easily solved. Here are excerpts from the article:

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Pharmacies that print prescription labels translated into Spanish often issue inaccurate or confusing instructions that could be potentially hazardous to a patient's health, according to a report in the May issue of *Pediatrics* journal. Researchers looked at 76 medicine labels generated by 13 different computer programs that many pharmacies use to make translations and found an overall error rate of 50 percent.

"It's not surprising, and it's something I experience in practice every day," said Dr. Alejandro Clavier, who works at Esperanza Health Center in Chicago's Little Village neighborhood on the Southwest Side. He gave an example of an anemic patient who showed no signs of improved iron levels after taking prescribed supplements. Clavier discovered the patient had been taking only one drop of the supplements instead of the amount that Clavier had prescribed. The patient had received confusing prescription instructions from the pharmacy.

Prescription information delivered in "Spanglish," a mix of English and Spanish, is a frequent problem, according to the study. For example, instructions to take iron "once" a day would mean one time. But in Spanish, *once* means 11. It could be harmful for a patient to take 11 doses of iron a day, the study noted.

Misspellings also created errors. The study found that instead of the word *boca*, which means "mouth" in Spanish, *poca*, which means "little," was used.

"It's scary how high the error rate is," said lead author Dr. Iman Sharif, chief of the division of general pediatrics at the Nemours/Alfred I. duPont Hospital for Children in Wilmington, Del. "If we can't do this right in Spanish — the most commonly spoken non-English language in the U.S. — I'm afraid to think what happens with the other languages."

Sharif's report, which surveyed pharmacies in the Bronx, N.Y., goes hand-in-hand with the findings of a study last year from Northwestern University's Feinberg School of Medicine. According to that study, many pharmacies in four states with large or rapidly

growing Latino populations cannot provide prescription translations. That 2009 study also found that almost 35 percent of pharmacies surveyed did not offer translation services, and about 22 percent offered only limited translation services.

Sharif, the study's author, said that one of the biggest problems is that English prescription instructions aren't standardized. Because the same instructions can be written in multiple ways, the available databases can't translate every word that doctors use to write prescription instructions, she said.

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