



Language capabilities of Free State doctors

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To the Editor: The population of the Free State is 2.7 million, with more than 2.3 million people having a home language other than English or Afrikaans.¹ The tuition languages at most South African medical schools are English and Afrikaans, with the University of KwaZulu-Natal and Cape Town requiring an undergraduate indigenous language course. Various studies have demonstrated that health care workers' inability to communicate with patients can lead to patients experiencing health-related adverse effects and limited access to health services.²⁻⁴ Patients require quality information in order to participate in health care decision-making.⁵ The goals of this study were to demonstrate the language capabilities of doctors practising in the Free State.

This descriptive study included 800 randomly chosen medical doctors younger than 65 years of age and practising in the Free State. Questionnaires and a covering letter explaining the study were posted to the doctors. Five doctors participated in a pilot study, participation was voluntary, and doctors remained anonymous. All respondents gave written informed consent and the Ethics Committee of the Faculty of Health Sciences, University of the Free State, approved the study.

A total of 308 questionnaires were received; of these, 277 were included in the study (31 were excluded because doctors were older than 65 years or were not practising in the Free State). The respondents were mostly male (72.9%) and had a median age of 46 years (range 26 - 65 years). Most respondents were in private sector employment (61.0%), followed by public service (33.6%), and some were in private sector and public service employment (5.4%).

Most respondents (46.2%) had completed their undergraduate training at the University of the Free State medical school, followed by the University of Pretoria (22.7%), Stellenbosch University (14.8%), the University of KwaZulu-Natal (4.3%), the University of the Witwatersrand (4.3%), and other South African universities (3.7%). Eleven respondents (4.0%) were educated in a foreign country. Most respondents (84.8%) indicated Afrikaans as their home language, followed by English (6.5%), Sotho (5.8%), Tswana (1.8%) and Xhosa

(1.1%). Ten respondents (3.6%) indicated that they had more than one home language. Regarding the respondents' language capabilities, the majority had some knowledge of English (98.6%) and Afrikaans (96.4%) and a large group (38.9%) had some knowledge of Sotho, but only 32.9% were able to speak Sotho. Interestingly, knowledge of German (16.6%), not an official language, fared marginally better than Zulu and Xhosa, which are South Africa's most spoken home languages. The respondents' language capabilities are given in Table I.

Table I. Respondents' language capabilities (N = 277)

Language	Frequency	%
Afrikaans	267	96.4
English	273	98.6
Sesotho	108	38.9
German	46	16.6
IsiZulu	39	14.1
IsiXhosa	31	11.2
Setswana	29	10.5
Sepedi	23	8.3
French	8	2.9
SiSwati	8	2.5
IsiNdebele	7	2.2
Dutch	6	1.4
Indian dialects	4	1.1
African dialects	3	1.1
Russian	3	1.1
Tshivenda	3	1.1
Arabic	2	0.7
Italian	2	0.7
Portuguese	2	0.7
Spanish	2	0.7
Xitsonga	2	0.7
Chinese	1	0.4
Polish	1	0.4

Only one-third of respondents could speak Sesotho, the language most spoken in the Free State.¹ In order to improve doctors' language proficiency, from 2006 the Health Sciences Faculty at the University of the Free State has introduced a compulsory Sotho language-speaking course for its first-year medical students. An Afrikaans language-speaking course has also been introduced for students not familiar with Afrikaans.

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