

When every sign matters

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SIGN language interpreting in hospitals is not the same as in conferences or meetings. There are no slides, no prepared scripts – just people, symptoms and unfamiliar words.

It's a task that requires proper training – one that Jonah Ong, an interpreter from the Interpreters and Translators Association for Selangor and Kuala Lumpur Deaf Community (JUPEBIM), is now better equipped to handle, thanks to a course he completed earlier this year.

Designed by IMU Cares – the Community Engagement and Sustainability office at IMU University – together with JUPEBIM, the Medical Basics for Sign Language Interpreters course aims to bridge communication gaps between doctors and Deaf patients.

"Normally, we use sign language that Deaf people understand in daily life. But in a medical setting, spelling out a disease name or medication isn't enough. We have to use visual vernacular and facial expressions to show where the surgical cut would be and how the brain sits in the skull," Ong told *StarEdu*.

The course – launched in November last year, with the first cycle concluding in January and the next one commencing this September – focuses on medical terms, medications and diseases, he said.

"We had a Deaf guest lecturer from overseas teaching us ways to show concepts in 3D using signs, classifiers and expressions. That really opened my eyes," he shared.

Following the completion of the first cycle, interpreters like Ong have been actively interpreting for Deaf patients receiving complimentary consultations and treatment at IMU Healthcare clinics.

They were also on hand to provide assistance to Deaf individuals who attended the IMU Deaf Aware and Ready Health Carnival in February, where services such as dental screening,

From medical terms to diagnoses, IMU-trained interpreters are helping to ensure Deaf patients are heard



Lim

Ong

Adibah

Prof Khoo

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chiropractic clinics and traditional Chinese medicine consultations were offered.

"As interpreters, we have to understand our Deaf clients. When scheduled to meet a Deaf patient, we arrive early and have 'small talk' first – to get to know them, especially if it's a Deaf child or an elderly Deaf person. That helps when it comes to meeting the doctor and understanding the medical history," said Ong, who has 20 years of experience in the field.

He added that interpreters must also draw on their creativity.

"Doctors try to find out how the pain feels – burning, poking, dull – and rate it from one to 10. But many Deaf patients may not know how to express this clearly. So we get creative: asking the children if the pain is big or small, or frowning deeply with our eyes to show how severe the pain is," he explained.

JUPEBIM president Lucy Lim, who interprets not only at IMU clinics but also in hospitals and other clinics, added that interpreters must be assertive and com-

posed, especially in emotionally charged situations.

"For example, when you interpret the words 'You have stage four cancer', you will see the Deaf person in shock or in tears. But it's our role to stay grounded, to interpret faithfully without becoming emotional or showing our expressions," she said.

According to Adibah Hakimi, student lead of the project, the course curriculum covers human anatomy, common conditions across specialties, and even ethics in medicine, while a medical signing book developed by IMU students serves as a study tool for interpreters before the final assessment in the course.

"I wrote the book as a side quest to the course. We had 25 writers consisting of third- and fourth-year students, as well as fresh graduates, working on the chapters alongside faculty members.

"Prof Dr Suneet Sood, our deputy head of surgery, did the majority of the work like illustration editing, while I helped to ensure we did not fall behind schedule. Editors of the book include Assoc Prof Dr Ismail Abdul Sattar Burud, Dr Nabeel Ibraheem Jaafar, Prof Suneet and me. It is the first book published by IMU Cares, complete with an ISBN number," she said.

She also shared that Prof

Suneet, who is currently working on volume two of the book, will be presenting the project at the 1st World Association of Sign Language Interpreters Asia Conference 2025 in Kuala Lumpur in August.

As part of the varsity's ongoing Deaf Aware and Ready (DeAR) initiative, the next cycle of the Medical Basics for Sign Language Interpreters course – open to anyone able to interpret Malaysian Sign Language – will run for 16 weeks starting in September.

Since its inception in 2020, the DeAR initiative – born out of the challenges brought on by the Covid-19 pandemic and led by IMU Community Engagement and Sustainability dean Prof Dr Khoo Suan Phaik – has reached over 500 Deaf individuals through various programmes across the varsity's four campuses.

Over 150 IMU students have engaged in experiential learning opportunities focused on patient-centred care, and more than 145 students have completed basic sign language training.

Building on the success of the inaugural Medical Basics for Sign Language Interpreters course, the varsity is expanding the programme to welcome more interpreters, including those from neighbouring countries.

Prof Khoo said the varsity's journey towards becoming a

Deaf-aware and Deaf-ready institution reflects a broader call to action for all Malaysians.

"We have made meaningful progress through Deaf awareness activities and collaborations with Deaf schools to enhance digital literacy, health access, and supportive learning environments.

"But inclusivity is not the work of one institution alone – it is a shared responsibility," she concluded.

Li Lian, 20, a student in Kuala Lumpur, is a participant of the BRATS Young Journalist Programme run by The Star's Newspaper-in-Education (StarNIE) team. For updates on the BRATS programme, go to facebook.com/niebrats.