



Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse

THE TROJAN HORSE

By Victor Kumar-Misir, M.D.

"Timeo 'DNA' et dona ferentes"

Throughout human history, pandemic microbial plagues have periodically decimated mankind, and historically altered the geopolitical, socioeconomic landscape of the planet.

Inevitable *bio-disasters* – natural or terrorist, e.g., a highly contagious killer flu or a biologic weapon of mass destruction epidemic – will require *mass screening of threatened populations* to identify and isolate the infected, to prevent spread.

Infected non-English-speaking individuals in today's multilingual communities may not get screened, and therefore would remain unrecognized and not isolated. As many may continue to work – as housekeepers, maids, drivers, gardeners, maintenance workers, etc. – they would constitute a veritable *microbial host 'Trojan horse'* that would then disseminate the pandemic microbe widely, especially in the densely populated commercial and domestic institutions and thoroughfares that characterize most North American cities.

In *bio-disasters*, *mass, multilingual medical screening* would be *crucial* for identifying and isolating infected 'Trojan horse' microbial *hosts*, in order to prevent widespread microbial dissemination and socio-economic disruption.

However, cost-saving and life-preserving trans-lingual, cross-cultural communication is not as simple as one would imagine and is fraught with unexpected dangers.

As an Emergency Room physician and Family Doctor, permit me to share with you a few of the experiences and lessons I have encountered over the past 40+ years, in attempting to meet this trans-lingual and cross-cultural challenge.

TRANSLINGUAL COMMUNICATION

“What’s in a Name?” Names serve to identify individuals, but may also indicate origin. For example, names *ending* with: ‘-escu’ may be Romanian, ‘-deh’ Iranian, ‘-polous’ Greek, ‘-vic’ Serbian. Names *beginning* with: ‘Al-’ may be Arabic.

Words Can Be Misleading: “Oo” sounds like “No,” but means “Yes,” in Philippine Tagalog. “Nyet” sounds like “Yes,” but means “No,” in Russian. In Spanish, “Constipado” sounds like “constipation,” but means “nasal congestion,” and “Embarasada” sounds like “embarrassment,” but means “pregnancy.”

Informal interpreters’ disinformation: *Bilingual bystanders*, often relatives, are dangerous, because of unsubstantiated bilingual proficiency, breach of confidentiality and patient embarrassment. *Corridor consultations* with non-medical staff, e.g. maintenance, can be more problematic because of misguided confidence. I once trusted a bilingual orderly, who, instead of translating my clinical instructions, was telling patients, in Chinese, that I wanted them to see a herbalist friend of his.

Formal interpreters’ misinformation: In 1983, at the Norman Bethune Hospital in China, a Western doctor told the large Chinese audience “In Canada, if a schoolteacher became pregnant out of wedlock, she would be *fired*.” Their best interpreter said “In Canada, if a schoolteacher became pregnant out of wedlock, she would be *shot*.”

Linguistic Equivalents: The use of dictionaries or computer translations is fraught with literal misinterpretation. In Quebec, “sick to your *stomach* (nausea)” is not the literal “mal a l’*estomac*” but “mal au *coeur*,” i.e. a weak *heart*. Nausea in battle was considered by the Normans, like Richard the Lionhearted, to indicate a lack of bravery, which was thought to emanate from the *heart*. This was assimilated in the post-1066 English Lexicon as ‘courage’ and ‘coward.’ In North Carolina, ‘nausea’ is “green in the gills,” and in Trinidad, it is “bad feeling.”

Conclusion: *Trans-lingual communication* is not a simple undertaking. In my experience, to be medically accurate in order to avoid serious clinical consequences, one must use my **F A C T S** methodology: **F**ormal translation to be grammatically correct, **A**cculturated with vernacular linguistic equivalents, **C**ontemporized in the original country, **T**ested in practice, and **S**ubcultured for specific dialects.

CROSS-CULTURAL COMMUNICATION

Gestures Can Be Misinterpreted

In Bulgaria, tilting the head up and down means “No” (not “Yes,”) and sideways means “Yes” (not “No.”)

“Hook ‘em horns,” the University of Texas rallying gesture, in Italy, means that one’s spouse is cheating. In Africa, it means levying a curse, but in Venezuela, it is a good luck sign. Showing the sole of your shoe is the ultimate Middle Eastern insult.

“” means “OK” in the United States. However, in France, it means “zero,” and therefore “you are worthless.” In Japan, it means “coins,” and indicates an offer of bribery. In Brazil, it refers to a private female orifice.

“” means “approval,” “great,” “good job,” or “hitch hiking” in the United States. In Nigeria, it is a rude gesture. In a bar in Japan it is the signal for “five drinks,” in Germany, “one drink,” yet pointing up with the index finger means you are ordering “two drinks.”

Conclusion: “Be careful to use culturally-appropriate body language.”

The current trans-lingual, cross-cultural communication challenge is local and global, is real and important, and demands our professional response. *Bp*

Victor Kumar-Misir, M.D., is an international physician, who has spent the past 40 years integrating trans-lingual, cross-cultural healthcare delivery with emerging information-management technologies, with input from physician executives of national academies of medicine in over 30 countries. He has been a media spokesman and key-note speaker in several countries, including the Society for Intercultural Education Training and Research (SIETAR). Fax: (281) 532-4329, email: jmlyon33@earthlink.net