

It's all *Deutsch* to me



One of the hardest things about living abroad is finding a new doctor, especially one who can speak your language. As an American living in Switzerland, I used CIGNA International's advice to find a family practice located in Zurich. But when I arrived at the office, I realised there must have been a mistake.

By Chantal Panozzo | Arriving at the medical building, I immediately reach for my ever-present *Langenscheidt*. Since I don't want to look like a complete moron out on the street, I wait to open my German-to-English dictionary until I am standing in front of the doctor's office. *Peter Grot*, the door reads, *Arzt für Allgemeine Medizin FMH*.

Immediately, I start to worry that even though I had looked up 'family practice' on the insurance company's website, this must be an allergy doctor based on the word *allgemeine*. Well, I reason, even if Dr. Grot turns out to be an allergist, he could probably still take care of my problem.

For the last two weeks, my hearing has gotten worse and worse. I figured it had to be caused by one of two things: unforeseen earwax build-up (which has happened to me before) or a subconscious protest against listening to a language that declares words like 'girl' to be sexless, 'ear drops' to be feminine and 'mistake' to be masculine (well, that one I'll accept).

But really, as if my German comprehension weren't bad enough ... Now all the dialects usually composed of the mysterious duet of 's' and 'ch' sounds have also gained additional buzzing and bleeping undertones due to the constant ringing in my left ear.

The usual reaction from most people when you fail to understand them is that they'll say the exact same thing again, only twice as loud. Normally, this custom is rather irritating, but for the last two

weeks I have been grateful for the screamers, as the increase in volume has actually been beneficial. Now, instead of only hearing muffled 'sh' sounds, I hear *Icsh hab* (I have), followed by more muffled 'sh' sounds.

Smile and nod

When I'm finally closing in on the 'a-l-l' section of the dictionary, someone coming up the stairs interrupts my frantic page flipping. She smiles and I realise with horror that she is going in the same door that I need to enter.

She turns out to be the receptionist so there's no pretending I can speak German. She knows I can't even read the sign on the door. Pretty soon she'll know I can't hear, either.

As I struggle to fill out a medical information form that is in four languages – not including English – I sneak a few looks around the reception area for signs that my allergy hypothesis is correct. I see a bunch of medical brochures, but none with images of women in pastel cotton dresses dancing through fields of flowers, so I think maybe I'm not at an allergist's office after all.

I leave a few incomprehensible sections blank on the medical information sheet and try to look innocent. I don't get away with it.

"*Krankenkarte?*" asks the receptionist, as she points to one of my offensive omissions.

I stare at her. My German-English dictionary begs to be opened. But I'm frozen in place.

"*Krankenkarte?*" she says louder, clearly following custom.

This time I try the smile and nod tactic. She doesn't buy it.

Instead she switches to English, "insurance card?"

"Oh, CIGNA *International*," she says as I hand her my card, and she stresses the word 'international', like this has demystified my entire existence to her. But I guess as things go, if you have to be summed up by one word, it could be worse.

An international effort

When I finally see the doctor I explain that my German isn't good.

"*Sie haschen Italianish Schname und shcanschan?*" he says in disbelief, when I explain that despite my last name, I don't speak Italian, either.

"I'm American," I say, like this should explain why I'm a one-language wonder. At this point, I realise that my hands are clenched. But I can't blame either the receptionist or the doctor, because yesterday, the woman on the insurance hotline said that all of their recommended doctors spoke English. She lied.

I tell myself I shouldn't blame the nameless insurance lady either, for this doctor's lack of English-language skills. After all, she was probably working from an Indian call centre and reading a script prepared by someone on another continent. In any case, there was no time for blame. A metal instrument was invading my ear.



© Brian Opyd

Chantal in flowers – the perfect advertisement for allergy medication

Comforts of home

After a thorough investigation, the doctor must have decided it didn't matter what language he spoke. He inserts drops in each ear and has me follow him into another room, speaking rapid-fire German the entire way there.

"Zwei Minuten pro Ohr," he says, and hands me something. I understand. But before I can actually express my comprehension of his instructions for "two minutes per ear" and make up for my past ignorance, he's left me to fend for myself with a hot black metal stick.

After about 10 minutes, the doctor returns. "Fertig?" he asks. I nod and look up. And that's when I see a huge stainless steel plunger. Imagine my relief. Something familiar, even a horrendous medical device, makes things more comfortable. Of course, Oreo cookies would have been better. But in a foreign land, you take what you can get. In my case, this stain-

less steel plunger would have to suffice.

As the metal tube presses harder and harder against my eardrum, I think, 'ah, the comforts of home'. My recollection of a similar experience with stubborn earwax in my paediatrician's office 20 years ago was somewhat cheering. Even without the hope of a free lollypop this time around.

No mistake, after all

Later, back at work, I check the word *allgemeine*, (yes, it means 'general'). And I enjoy my improved hearing so much that I almost feel like dancing in a field of flowers. Although since I still can't understand the locals, I think that if I were mostly deaf, at least I'd have an excuse.

Instead, when the Swiss repeat things to me at double the volume, I just smile and think while I can no longer call myself hard of hearing, 'international' certainly has a nice ring to it.

All things Swiss



Switzerland through the ages

1902: January 1, 1902 marks the official birth of the Swiss Federal Railways (SBB). In the 19th century, Switzerland's various railway systems were privately owned, which lead to competition between parallel lines linking popular destinations and no service to outlying areas. On February 20, 1898, a referendum was passed to create a state-owned railway company. Existing lines were run by the new SBB on behalf of private companies. The Swiss Confederation ran its first train on New Year's Day from Zurich to Geneva, via Bern.

Expat encyclopaedia

By the minute: The way some Swiss doctors charge for office visits.

CHF: The German-speaking designation for Swiss currency that expats carry in large denominations (like 100, 200, and even 1,000 franc notes) in order to both cover their purchases and hide their ignorance when not understanding the cashier.

Grüezi Mitenand: Meaning, "hello everyone," it's the polite thing to say when entering a doctor's waiting room, or other establishment in German-speaking Switzerland.

Long words that look scary, and are:

Geschwindigkeitsüberschreitung (speeding)

Hirnerschütterung (concussion)

Long words that look scary, but aren't:

Krankenversicherungsgesetz (Health Insurance Act that says every person living in Switzerland is required to have health insurance)

Rahmenbedingungen (general conditions)

Noise: A carnival band is allowed to play the same song 1,234 times on brass instruments, as loud as possible, below your window until six in the morning. But you will be yelled at the next day for all that noise you made doing laundry over the lunch hour.

Smile and nod: An expat may never become an expert at German, French or Italian, but they will become an expert at smile and nod. These days, I'd give anything to smile simply because something said was worth smiling about. Instead I pretty much smile and nod at everything in order to communicate.