INTRODUCTION TO THE FIELD OF MEDICAL INTERPRETING

An interpreter differs from a translator in that a translator works with the **written word** (documents).

An interpreter, on the other hand, works mainly with the **spoken word** (what is being said; **utterance**).

Interpreters do also work with documents but in a different way than a translator does. A **translator** takes a document and produces a new version of the document in another language. An interpreter doesn’t habitually do that.
An interpreter does fill out paperwork that is in a language different from the patient’s native tongue by interpreting the document to the patient and then writing the patient’s responses on the form. An interpreter may also simply read out-loud to a patient the content of a form (sight translation). Many people do not know this and mistakenly refer to interpreters as “translators”.

Interpreters are used in different settings:

1) **Hospitals and Clinics**:

This is us, the medical interpreters. In this setting, the interpreter will be interacting with different healthcare professionals: doctors, nurses, historians, health technicians, etc. The interpreting is done in areas as: *waiting rooms, patient rooms*, or on the *floor* (the “floor” being an area where there may be several patients together separated by curtains for example).

2) **Courts**:

In this setting the interpreter will be working in the presence of *lawyers, judges* and *other court personnel*. Medical Interpreters are NOT used in this setting, Court Interpreters are.
3) **Over-the-Phone (OTP):**

In this setting the medical interpreter will be **working on the phone**. He/She gets calls in which the interpreter is “conferenced-in” with a healthcare provider and a patient so that they can **all hear each other at the same time**. A variation is **Video Conference** where the parties **can hear and see each other**.

**CERTIFICATION**

When Interpreters have passed a certification test it is then considered that they have the minimum amount of knowledge and skills necessary to do their work effectively and accurately. **CERTIFICATION = PROFESSIONALISM**.

The same does not necessarily hold true for “**ad-hoc**” or **non-certified interpreters who have not been tested**. **When a non-certified interpreter is used there is no guarantee that he will be up to standard when interpreting.**
Are all certified interpreters equal? Not really, just as not all lawyers or doctors are equal in their ability to excel at their functions but at least a certification establishes a minimum standard of knowledge.

Becoming an excellent interpreter will depend on:

- An individual’s natural interpreting abilities and talents
- The individual’s desire to strive for excellence
- Continuing their education: on a day to day basis by looking up new vocabulary or idioms as they come up (and believe me they always do!) and also by attending interpreting conferences and workshops.

YOUR LIFE AS A MEDICAL INTERPRETER.

How do interpreters work? How complicated is the job? What about the lifestyle associated with the interpreting profession?. Let me tell you a little about how it will be. An interpreter can provide services as an independent contractor or be employed. Let’s see how this impacts on lifestyle:

Interpreters who work as INDEPENDENT CONTRACTORS for interpreting agencies are typically:

- **Paid per hours** or per half day or full day of work.
- Generally **do not get benefits** (sick days, paid vacation or insurance).
- Have **flexible schedules** (can decide to work more or less hours).
- Establish their own rates.
- Can **write off business expenses** like parking fees, mileage, etc.
Interpreters who work as **EMPLOYEES** at a hospital or clinic

Typically:

- Hold **part or full time** positions.
- **Get benefits** (usually when they work full time).
- Do **not have a flexible schedule**.
- Work for a **fixed hourly rate**.
- Do **not get the tax cuts** that an independent contractor does.

So, having said this, if you enjoy a more “corporate” type structure and the benefits it provides (like a regular paycheck and paid vacations) then look for a Hospital or Clinic that will employ you with the ensuing benefits and a 9 to 5 type workweek. If, on the other hand, you like going to different places everyday, meeting new people, taking your vacations when you decide to or taking days off whenever you need to, then becoming an independent contractor may be the right choice for you. Either way is fine. Just be aware of the differences and then decide **what is best for you**.