



INTERNATIONAL MEDICAL
INTERPRETERS ASSOCIATION
Leading the advancement of professional interpreters

2010 IMIA ESSAY CONTEST

WINNING ESSAYS

(in alphabetical order by author's last name)

Rejane Franco (New Jersey)

The Need for Professional Medical Interpreters

In this time of restricted budgets and cost cuts, health care organizations in America are facing a huge challenge to provide appropriate care for diverse patient populations with Limited English Proficiency (LEP). These patients require the assistance of a professional interpreter to communicate with their health care providers in order to get the appropriate care for their medical conditions. Unfortunately, there are some health care organizations that still do not understand this critical aspect in patient care and do not provide LEP patients with the services of a professional interpreter. Many times, patients' relatives (even minors) or bilingual employees are used as interpreters. There are serious problems with this approach not only because of confidentiality issues, but also due to the fact that *ad hoc* interpreters are untrained individuals who cannot provide the same quality of interpretation a trained medical interpreter would be able to.

The use of a professional medical interpreter to facilitate the communication between patient and provider does not only contribute to achieve a better quality of patient care and help providers avoid possible malpractice lawsuits, but also help them prevent being accused of discrimination. Denying medical interpreters to LEP patients is a direct violation of Title VI of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, which prohibits discrimination based on race, color, or national origin in programs that receive federal grants. Therefore, every hospital or clinic that receives money from the federal government is not only in violation of this law, if they do not provide interpreters to LEP patients, but are also risking losing their federal grants.

As a professional interpreter for the past fifteen years and a medical interpreting instructor for the past five, I have been able to see the increased need for trained medical interpreters and the serious problems a provider can have when one is not provided. Interpreting is a difficult job and requires several skills. An interpreter has the challenging tasks of understanding the message, finding the equivalent meaning in the other language and, immediately after, interpreting what was said. The interpreting process is not only intricate, but also fast, and the interpreter has to render an accurate interpretation within seconds of hearing the message. Besides, while processing the two languages, the interpreter has to take into consideration the meaning of the words that were said (including medical terminology), the cultural background of the parties, the ethical aspects of the encounter and the transparency of the communication. These are skills that only trained interpreters possess.

People's health is a major aspect of their life, if not the most important one. Health care providers frequently express their frustrations for not being able to properly communicate with their patients for lack of a professional medical interpreter. I feel privileged for being able to provide medical interpreting for LEP patients and their providers and contribute in a positive way for the patients' proper diagnosis and treatment. My main goals, as a medical interpreter and interpreting instructor, are to promote the importance of professional medical interpretation for LEP patients and continue to encourage a high standard of professionalism for every interpreting student I have the opportunity to instruct.



Florence Goulet (Massachusetts)

I became a medical interpreter because I want to be the light of understanding between refugees from my home continent of Africa and their medical caregivers here. I use the image of light because it reminds me of the small rural village in Uganda where I grew up. After I came home from school, I would go with my parents to harvest sorghum after dark. When the moon was full and the sky was clear, it was easy. With a new moon or a cloudy sky, not so easy, but we worked together and stayed close. No one had ever heard of a torch (what I have learned to call a flashlight here), leave alone owned one.

Just like a flashlight illuminates obstacles that can harm the people that walk in darkness, the interpreter shines a light at the feet of patients who know no English and the doctor or nurse who is caring for them, helping both to find their way home safely. Without the interpreter they will both be lost.

When I heard of the genocide in Rwanda in 1994, it was not just a news story to me. My birth home is only a few miles from the border between Uganda and Rwanda, and our languages, Rufumbira and Kinyarwanda, are very similar.

My first thought was, what will happen to the people who survived the massacre and cannot stay there? Some few went to France, but mostly only the educated elite. The rest, the poor and less educated, were scattered all over the world, including the United States. Some spent years in refugee camps before they were resettled. Many people don't know this, but the Rwandan genocide led to similar events in Burundi and the eastern Congo, which are still going on.

The worst sufferers are always the women and children. In the deep villages of these countries, women and girl children as young as four or even two years old are raped. Of course that is terrifying, but just as bad is the fact that the women who do most of the work in raising food and feeding their families are displaced from their fields because of turmoil, and they and their children go hungry.

I am a naturalized American citizen, and I am very proud that my country has welcomed so many of these people so they can have a better life. I know that some of them cause problems in the short run, but some will also be heroes later when they have understood our ways, especially how if you work hard to get an education, you can do anything, reach any goal. It is not like that at all in Africa.

Many of these refugees have serious health problems because they have never seen a doctor before coming to the United States. When they arrive here confused and disoriented, I can do my small part to give them a new start in their new country. This is why I am proud to be a medical interpreter.



Larry Salas (Massachusetts)

Life works in strange ways. I never would have expected to be a medical interpreter. But, here I am – a newly certified Spanish medical interpreter...and I'm thrilled about this new chapter in my life!

For as long as I can remember, I have thought mostly in words (as opposed to pictures) and have had a fascination with languages. Not surprising, since I come from a country where everybody speaks at least four languages to a greater or lesser extent. I was born and lived most of my life on the island of Curaçao, in the Dutch Caribbean. Everyone there speaks at least the local (Portuguese) Creole language. The proximity to North and South America make Spanish and English knowledge a virtual necessity. Lastly, since its part of the Dutch kingdom, the education is in Dutch. I made it my goal to more than get by and speak each of those languages as well as possible and in the most authentic accent as possible. Even though I cannot necessarily say that I have been successful in the accent department, I have enjoyed the process immensely and continue to do so every day.

Although not personally my first choice, my professional life has mostly centered around business, management and sales. This satisfied my need for personal contact most of all. But, my need for an involvement in science and research went largely unmet. I have spent a lot of time struggling to figure out how to synthesize and combine my interest and talents in languages and communication along with my fascination with science. I am happy to say that I may have found it. In fact, I'm sure I've found it!

This did not happen overnight, however. Six years ago, after an agonizing period of self-analysis and reinvention, I cautiously approached the field of translation (Dutch to English and Spanish to English) on the recommendation of good friends of mine who were in the field. I decided that I would have a go at it, bought the software and electronic dictionaries to assist me in written translation, hung up my shingle and embarked on the life of a freelance translator. Over the years I found that being a translator is a lonely existence. I longed for personal contact most of all.

A whole new universe of possibilities opened for me when I learned about medical interpreting. I could engage in my passions of language, communication, science and help people all in the same profession. In addition, when I read about the IMIA and its tireless efforts to raise the standards and ethics of medical interpreters everywhere, I was sold. I would do everything in my power to become qualified to do this noble and interesting work. So far, I have gotten my certification and all I am waiting for is to get to work. I can't wait!

At one point, I was confused about what direction to go in. What to do next in my career.

Not anymore.

I have figured it out.

I'm a medical interpreter.



Catherine Swift (Colorado)

Medical Interpreting Means the World To Me

Medical interpreting has opened up new horizons for me. For years, I worked as a highly-paid interpreter in the business sector, traveling all over the globe and savoring the excitement and challenge of consecutive and simultaneous interpreting. But then I stumbled into medical interpreting at a friend's request, and ever since, it's been my foremost priority. Medical interpreting has brought some of the most meaningful experiences I've ever had, as I've shared the joy of a baby being born, felt the agony of parents losing a child, relayed news of a terminal illness, and rejoiced with a patient receiving hoped-for test results. Medical interpreting has brought a whole new dimension to my interpreting experience, in the form of the human element. Interpreting has always been what I wanted to do most, and I've always loved being a crucial part of interaction among people. But medical interpreting makes me feel necessary and intensely involved in the human experience.

I became a medical interpreter after that first foray into the medical world, when I began delving into books, compiling vocabulary lists and reading everything available about the human body and its foibles and feats. It's a field that presents never-ending challenges and constantly offers new knowledge to be mastered. In my past life, customers picked up the tab for five-star accommodations, flight tickets, seven-course meals. In a recent medical assignment, I grabbed 15-minute naps on a rollaway bed in a delivery room, fed coins into the vending machine in the lobby, and agreed to nurse an agency's overstretched budget by skipping reimbursement for travel time. What did I gain? The pleasure of seeing a pregnant woman relax because she understood what was being said to her. The thrill of seeing the baby born after a grueling 24 hours. The satisfaction of driving home bone-tired, knowing that I had just done an important and necessary job, and made several people's lives easier.

Will I continue to accept the high-flying, luxury-oriented jobs in the business world? Not a doubt in my mind. After all, facilitating communication is what I want to do, in whatever form. But when I'm looking for satisfaction and fulfillment, for the sense that I've served where I'm needed, for the knowledge that I've truly made a difference, medical interpreting is where I'm going to find it. I hope, as a medical interpreter, that I can give of myself and my skills, foster communication between patients and providers, and help propel the industry to greater heights of professionalism and service.

Medical interpreting requires a level of commitment found in few other fields. We interpreters work hard for our knowledge, skills and capabilities, constantly aware that a slip on our part could have disastrous consequences. But we know that when all is said and done, it's been said by us, and it couldn't have been done without us. We bring meaning to the world, and medical interpreting means the world to me.



INTERNATIONAL MEDICAL
INTERPRETERS ASSOCIATION
Leading the advancement of professional interpreters

Regina Underfer (North Carolina)

My Father speaks Martian. I understand him, but for sure others are having a hard time. He is 82 years old and quickly deteriorating from a horrible case of Alzheimer's with hydrocephalus. His words are garbled and slur together: mostly vowels sputter out of droopy lips. The glassy wet eyes are like punctuation marks that are inescapably present. I am constantly reminded that behind this alien mask, my Father still resides.

I see fear in his eyes, the fright of intense isolation. I feel the anxiety in his trembling hands, the nervousness from loss of control. I hear the anguish accented by guttural sounds that replace real words. I interpret the best I can for the man I love so much. I remind him that I can understand him, and then I give orders to the caretakers of what I unravel his words to mean.

I am a Medical Interpreter by career. Sometimes, I believe I selected this job, other days I believe this job chose me. As medical interpreters, we practice day in and day out the skill of professionally communicating symptoms, and details for the patient. Doctors need us to explain diagnosis, procedures, and protocols for care. We are the conduit of communication. We are the essential tool that conveys all thoughts, emotions, and actions. There is absolutely no substitute for this personal interconnection between medical provider and patient. The medical interpreter is unique.

Reward is metered out in countless variety for what we do. Some days it is a simple "thank you" or "gracias por su ayuda mijita" which is a perfect ending to any assignment. Other days, of the darker sort, end with tears that surround the sadness of death or final outcomes. These experiences too, are the recompense to a conclusion. In whichever circumstance, the interpreter's role serves tremendous value, for without it the bond of caregivers and receivers is incomplete.

So, tonight as a Medical Interpreter, I clock out as I leave the hospital. Tomorrow, I will hold the hand of a sick old man that speaks a foreign language...sounds like Martian to me...and I am reminded of my gift; care delivered with love is always understood in whatever language it is uttered.