

From Ad Hoc to CMI: How National Certification Changed My Life

By Midori Altamirano, CMI-Spanish

The most important change in my life resulting from the National Certification is that it has allowed me to be recognized as a professional in the area of medical interpretation. I started as an ad hoc interpreter with a desire to serve the Hispanic community, by increasing access to healthcare through my knowledge of Spanish and English languages. I did not have any formal training or guidance, but I was interested in interpretation because language and cultural barriers are critical components of equitable access to healthcare. I learned about the certification from the Oregon Health Authority website and decided that my goal would be to obtain the National Certification for healthcare interpreters.

Preparing for the examination helped me improve the quality of my interpretation skills by providing me with the tools needed to understand the complexity of a medical encounter between people that are unable to communicate due to language and cultural barriers. I completed 120 hours of formal medical interpretation training, volunteered my services, and explored more about interpreting associations. Learning about the code of ethics, standards of practice, and interpreter skills changed my perception of interpretation from being a job that only requires you to be bilingual to a profession that navigates the intricacies of communication in the medical setting. After passing the examination, I noticed that my interpreter skills had improved tremendously, thus spurring my desire to promote awareness about the importance of having a National Certification for healthcare interpreters. Furthermore, having the title of Certified Medical Interpreter (CMI) has allowed me to be recognized as a professional in the field of medical interpretation. This recognition contributed to my promotion for the position of Lead Interpreter and has allowed me to become involved in the decision making of policies which serve limited English proficiency patients in clinics throughout Oregon and southern Washington.

Having a National Certification process promotes the autonomy of the profession, by defining the basic skills needed by healthcare interpreters and ensuring the proficiency through examination. Interpretation started as a task where untrained individuals, such as family members or bilingual staff, were considered capable of rendering the message between patient-provider. The problem with untrained interpreters is that they can jeopardize the patient's health when miscommunication occurs. The creation of the certification reduces the problems caused by informal interpreters, enhancing the patient-provider experience by promoting the use of qualified individuals to facilitate communication.

The National Certification defines the principles of the profession, by creating its own educational standards. In order to pass the examination, it is imperative to learn medical terminology and understand the concepts and specifics of disease and treatment for different cultures. Passing the examination is not only based on experience as an interpreter, but also in the specialized knowledge available in books, manuals, and documents from interpreter associations. Thanks to the National Certification interpreters are able to advance in their career paths and be recognized as professionals in the healthcare field.

How Certification Changed My Life

By Maria D. Bunce, CMI-Spanish.

Duke University Medical Center

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“Vamos, bajemos y ahí confundamos su lengua para que nadie entienda la lengua del otro. Así los disperso el Señor sobre la faz de la tierra...” Génesis 11:7-8

“Come, let Us go down and there confuse their language, so they will not understand one another’s speech.” So the Lord scattered them abroad from there over the face of the whole world... Genesis 11:7-8

In 2012 the medical interpreter plays a modern, efficient and a very essential role!

As a proud Certified Medical Interpreter, I have found new confidence in my everyday interactions with providers, patients and their families. As I studied to prepare for the written and oral exams, my head was filled with so much self-doubt. My years of experience working as a medical Interpreter for an award-winning institution meant nothing on those long evenings, reviewing notes and listening to pronunciation cd’s. During those months of study, I used every encounter as an opportunity as checklist of my skills and knowledge.

Team unity is a powerful tool! In the months prior to taking the exams our office became an exciting place with news and developments. Every team player that went to an encounter came back eager to share knowledge, such as a medical term or a new cutting-edge procedure. We shared study notes and encouraged each other, reminding each other of our strengths and skills; our team became a family!

Weeks became months, one by one the members of my team made their way to the nearest test facility to take the written exam. Good news started to arrive as we passed the written and oral components of the test; we were one proud group!

Having achieved certification, it is with renewed confidence and self-esteem that we approach our work. As we deliver good and bad news, translate documents, and work side by side with the best care providers and leading physicians in the world, Certification has provided a wonderful new dimension to our career.

Just as we medical interpreters strove before to earn the respect of our medical institutions, now, with a full Certified Medical Interpreter Program in place, we must renew our efforts as the pioneer CM Interpreters. We need to be the pushing hands of new generations of medical interpreters, supporting the efforts of the IMIA, guardians of the interests of all of us! We must help and take responsibility for our chosen profession.

Certification changed my life. I approach each new challenge empowered by skills I learned a long time ago as a child and brought back to life as I studied for the test. I view my teammates as dear family members that embarked on a journey with me, the kind and encouraging words we say to each other still resounding in my head. When I am called to an encounter with a patient and his family, I have the tools to deliver a flawless rendition every time and the initials next to my name fill my heart with so much pride!

The Impact of National Certification in the Interpreting World

By Vanessa Caraveo, CMI-Spanish

The young Hispanic mother nervously sits with her arm stretched out as the monolingual nurse takes her vital signs with her children looking on. "Does anyone in your family have any pre-existing medical condition?," the nurse asks. The invisible wall immediately becomes present, similar to many scenarios nationwide where individuals day-to-day have to face the dreaded language barrier in the immensely delicate medical environment. "Perdón?," the confused mother answers the nurse not understanding a word that was said. Turning to her 14 year old son the mother asks him, "Que dijo?". This is where the dangers and risks begin and why the vigorous steps and actions taken to promote National Board Certification for medical interpreters, has been one of the greatest advancements in the healthcare field in the recent years. Ad havoc interpreters like the one mentioned above, who are not adequately trained with the high level of knowledge needed for medical scenarios could have extremely negative consequences in any medical case. When no certified medical interpreters are available, hospitals and medical facilities at times take the route of using staff personnel (be it nurses, janitors, administrative personnel) to play the role of an interpreter when no medical interpreter is at hand, or worst, families sometimes request using other family members as medical interpreters who in some cases are children who have no knowledge of complex medical terminology for complex medical scenarios. The families generally due not have any idea of how using an ad havoc interpreter can greatly jeopardize the quality of treatment or proper diagnosis they receive. Patient safety mishaps as well as liability issues hospitals can face can greatly be prevented by having medical interpreters who are nationally certified confirming their high level of competence. A mishap case I will present is one where a man was prescribed pain-killers and the medicine label stated he was to take a pill once daily. The problem arises that the word once in English is spelled exactly as the word eleven in Spanish (once) and needless to say he took a huge overdose which could have been prevented if a medical interpreter would have been present to explain to him the dose indications. Being bilingual isn't simply enough as many may assume, nor having a basic understanding of English and Spanish. The medical environment is a complex world which requires a high level of knowledge in medical terminology which is often used by doctors and medical personnel for diagnosing illnesses, designating adequate treatments and performing important medical evaluations. With National Certification, Medical Interpreters must pass a vigorous national exam to obtain their board certified credential confirming their competence, have adequate training and experience, and must also take continued education courses throughout their earned credential to ensure they stay up to date with new changes and what is going on in the medical field. This huge advancement will now raise the bar in patient safety and prevent liability issues for healthcare entities, definitely a wonderful advancement in the interpreting world today.

National Certification – The path from Ignorance to Knowledge

By Lorena Z. Castillo

"A change between ignorance to knowledge..." That is how Aristotle defined the word 'Recognition' in his poetics. And it's really the best way to describe the impact that studying for the National Certification has had in my life.

As an Interpreter, my journey started when I was 12 years old. Having been in the United States for one whole year, my mother needed to rely on me to interpret on numerous occasions and in various settings. Her ability to learn the language was a lot slower than my siblings and I – we were sponges! There was though the one exception...the doctor's office. Why? As professional as we were at that age, we didn't have the terminology or the maturity that was necessary. The result was that my mother avoided the doctor like a plague. Knowing she couldn't explain to the doctor how she really felt was worse than being in the dark about her overall health. There was a time that she actually made it to the doctor's, they would bring a nurse that spoke Spanish, and she was thankful. But...the nurse had no idea that none of us understood her Spanish. At this early stage of my life, I could grasp that it wasn't just about having someone there to interpret; it was about having a standard that would differentiate the qualified interpreters from someone who happens to be bilingual.

My desire to become a Certified Medical Interpreter got stronger this year. When I realized how much work has been done to set up high quality standards for Healthcare Interpreters. As a volunteer in an Educational Bible Program for Deaf and Hard of Hearing, I know the force, the impact, that a group of individuals can have working toward one goal. Since Department of Justice issued a policy guidance document, that sets compliance standards more and more agencies are getting an idea of what it means to not discriminate based on national origin. Nevertheless, the National Certification will one of those tools that will help with the gray area. When more and more interpreters obtain their certification, providers will see the difference in patients. Patients will feel more comfortable asking questions, and will make informed choices when it comes to their healthcare.

Growing up, it was only my mother, but now it means hundreds of individuals that like my mom come up with any home remedies so they do not have to put their life at risk. As a result of this, I am determined to achieve my highest level of excellence by becoming a Certified Medical Interpreter. I have come to learn that this high level of quality isn't achieved through just "being the best you can be", but through having the courage to achieve high aspirations. I use the word courage because it can be a difficult. It's easier to simply interpret because you are bilingual; it takes that desire for higher quality to reach the goal. The National Certification gives me the opportunity, to challenge myself and as a result of the challenge produce excellence necessary to cross that bridge from ignorance to knowledge. Most importantly, achieving these standards will result in saving many people. Among these people, I will have the opportunity to help people like my mother, this time not like 12 year old bilingual interpreter, but as Certified Medical Interpreter.

The Number One; It marks the beginning.

By Noemy Cochran

There can be no doubt as to the importance of this primary number. In all languages, it is the symbol of unity. As a cardinal number, it denotes unity; as an ordinal, it denotes primacy. Unity being indivisible, and not made up of other numbers, is therefore independent of all others, and is the source of all others. What a wonderful explanation and what perfect analogy for the national certification movement around the country.

As difficult as taking the number one stand could be, someone, somewhere has to do it, individuals and organizations lead different efforts on a daily basis worldwide, to be the number one at something. What happens afterwards, that is a question that has been bugging me since our group here at work became the First team in the nation to become Certified Medical Interpreters, What to do next and how I will proceed from now on.

There was one person that spearheaded the effort, one person that took the plunge and one person that became the role model of an entire team. One by one, each of my team members took both tests and became certified medical interpreters. Later on we found it we were the only one team in the nation that had achieved that status.

After the initial euphoria, congratulations, photo shoots (yes, we were celebrities for a little while) reality sunk in and I started questioning myself, what all of these means to me and where to go from here.

To me, being a Medical Interpreter is an honor; to become a Certified Medical Interpreter has been a journey, a lesson in commitment, selflessness, and humbleness from a lot of people around the country that took that First step. I can't disappoint all of them; I must continue the journey to bring the profession to a higher level each and every time.

To all of us that already are CMI's and for those that are still thinking these are my recommendations:

- 1) Continue educating and learning; never fool yourself thinking you know it all.
- 2) Attend conferences, seminars, and webinars.
- 3) Actively join your local, national and International Professional Organizations.
- 4) Pay your dues, organizations in order to be successful and to provide services to their members need to collect fees.
- 5) Volunteer your talents and time within your associations.
- 6) Mentor other people in your interpreter community, organizations, schools etc.is not only rewarding to teach other people but it keeps you u on your toes.

As a professional, you need the strength of the group to move forward; but you must remember, the group cannot move without that one person.

Remember that even the mighty 1,000.000 has a number one in front to make it a powerful statement, so don't be afraid of been the number one, join the cause for a better future of the Medical Interpreter profession.

How Certification Changed My Life

By Jamey Cook

Several years ago, I jumped at an opportunity to interpret at the hospital where my mom works. Technically, I was fluent enough to enjoy the patient's great sense of humor, and convey his jokes to the staff, but I felt there was something missing. At the time, I was unable to explain exactly what that unknown element might be. A year later, I was fascinated by the interaction between a sign language professor and her interpreter. Specifically, I was wondering what explained how the interpreter facilitated communication while remaining in the background, so that the two of them interacted as one cohesive unit. I had no way of knowing that my own training and national certification as a spoken language interpreter would answer these and many other questions.

Soon after finishing my Master's, I realized that national certification for medical interpreters had become available, so I began AHEC courses. My goal was to combine my passion for Spanish with my interest in working within medical settings. The medical terminology course rounded out my training by providing new knowledge while building upon existing concepts. Just after completing the final course, I found work and passed both the written and oral certification exams--beginning a new life adventure as the first totally blind certified medical interpreter of Spanish.

As I applied my training, my understanding and practice of the why's and how's of professional interpreting increased. I have become a more accurate interpreter by taking notes rather than relying exclusively on memory. I find myself becoming more culturally competent as I carefully study regionalisms, accents, and phrasing, especially as they relate to register, style, slang and social class. Our confidentiality, impartiality and respect standards delineate my participation in each encounter as a facilitator of communication, while placing in the background human emotions and other distractions. Cultural awareness, advocacy, and role boundaries guide when my intervention is or is not warranted. Professionalism includes my own honesty, the trust others place in me, and my ability to perform my job well. I anticipate continuing my professional development and pursuing life-long learning, to eventually assume the role of mentoring novice interpreters.

Through each new encounter, I become more aware of the fact that interpreters not only facilitate understanding, but also help patients and the professionals who serve them to enhance bonds of community, trust, and respect. Obtaining the CMI credential has tremendously augmented my marketability, in that it authenticated my value, my credibility and my professionalism much beyond what was possible with work experience alone. The world may not be able to speak one language, but clear communication will open many doors, helping to make healthcare accessible to all. I look forward to growing with this dynamic and rewarding profession, and to both the perspective and the interaction interpreting continues to bring to my life. I count myself privileged to play a small part in making a large difference in understanding for my world.

The Impact of Certification on the Medical Interpreting Industry:

One Interpreter's Interpretation

By Jessica Dover, CMI

After nearly a decade of working as an interpreter in several states and internationally, I can attest that interpreting is as varied and colorful as an industry can get. From boardrooms to delivery rooms, convention centers to courthouses, interpreting always offers up something different to learn about, some new challenge to overcome, skills that must be constantly honed and perfected.

Of them all, however, medical interpreting has always been near-and-dear to my heart. Medical interpreting offers an insight into other peoples' choices and lives like no other profession. Vocalizing -- in first person -- the thoughts and opinions of a stranger is a unique experience. Medical interpreters see firsthand how some of the most important decisions of a person's life are made, and we are often present to see the consequences -- good and not-so-good -- of those decisions. The stakes are high in medical interpreting; accuracy and completeness are key. And yet, unlike its other high-stakes counterpart, court interpreting, the majority of the states in the U.S. do not require that medical interpreters be certified, nor do they require that interpreters pursue continuing education.

And that has got to change. Which is why I became certified.

I received my NBCMI certification last year, and the benefits were practically instantaneous. Among them:

- A higher hourly rate. Of all the different styles and modes of interpreting I perform as a contractor, medical interpreting has historically paid the least. A higher hourly rate not only translates into a better standard of living and a feeling of being more adequately compensated for the important work that I do, but it also means that I can afford to take those required continuing ed classes that help me keep my certification and continue to improve my quality of service for patients and their providers.
- Increased recognition -- both on the business side and the advocacy side. Being on the NBCMI roster has been a boon for my business (more employers are seeking me out now as opposed to the other way around). Plus, it gives me a great starting point to advocate for more of my colleagues to get certified, which several of them have since done. This helps increase quality of service across the board.
- Increased pressure on interpreting companies and clinics, hospitals, etc. to require certification and raise the standard. The more of us who become certified, the more difficult it will be for those entities to deny that certification is the wave of the future and that they better get on board. Again, certification equals higher quality of service. Who doesn't want that?

I hope to remain a part of this dynamic field for a long time to come. I also hope to see more and more hospitals, clinics, medical offices, and, of course, interpreters embrace certification as the pathway to more consistent, accurate, quality care. Our patients and their providers deserve -- and should demand -- trained professionals to act as their voice.

Making a Difference through National Certification

By Cristina Frasier, CMI

Supervisor, Interpreter Services

Vanderbilt University Medical Center

I came to United states in 2001 and if someone would've told me then that I would be a medical interpreter I would've said to them that they needed a psychiatric evaluation.

When I arrived in Miami in 2001, only a couple of weeks before that unforgettable 9/11, I thought that I had enough English knowledge to communicate ok. Very soon I found out that neither could I understand anyone, nor could anyone else understand me. So I actually, without knowing it, became an LEP individual!

5 years later, my husband and I moved to Tennessee and financial hardship made me rethink my career path. I was a surgical tech and a nurse in Argentina for 10 years, but I had not had the opportunity to get into the field in the US. So one day, a bit desperate, I asked myself: "what else do you know how to do? What is that one thing that separates you from the rest?" The answer came after a few days... "I am bilingual!". However, I knew this wasn't enough to become a "serious" interpreter. So I did my research and in 2007 I began my journey into the interpreting world. At that time, there weren't any medical interpreter trainings available, so I started with a court workshop. Everything happened so fast after that that it seems unreal to me.

I began working as a freelance interpreter in several fields, and in 2009 I became a full time medical interpreter for my dream institution: Vanderbilt University Medical Center. I remember driving by it and thinking "oh boy... what would I do to be an interpreter in this place..."

I started researching and investigating about the existence of a National Certification and soon I learned how young my profession was, as the first certification was not yet available. In 2010 I started the process of obtaining my CMI and on March 20th, 2011 I received my email stating that I had passed my oral exam and I could now start using the "CMI" after my name. I was filled with pride, not only professionally, but mainly personally, considering that 7 years earlier I could hardly speak English.

In 2012 I became the supervisor of Interpreter Services at Vanderbilt University Hospital. My goal and mission now are to guide other bilingual people who want to get into the medical interpreting field, to do it the right way, to encourage my own team to further their education and obtain certification to demonstrate the seriousness and importance of our profession. Our patients deserve it, our institutions deserve it, and we ourselves deserve to give the real value to this capacity that we have. It is not enough being bilingual; we must be professional Medical Interpreters. We must challenge ourselves to be the best in the industry, the first step it to become certified, and that is only the beginning.

Becoming a Certified Medical Interpreter changed not only my life, but that of those coming to me searching for a "way in". They will never get the short cut from me; they will only get the right route.

NATIONAL CERTIFICATION OF MEDICAL INTERPRETERS . . . ITS IMPACT

By Marisol Gutierrez

How safe would you feel as a passenger riding in a car with a driver who has no driver's license? I mean, yes, he has driven a car several times. He may even consider himself an "expert". "I know how to drive," he assures you, but does this really make you feel better? The question is, then, if he knows how to drive and is so confident of his driving ability, why doesn't he have a driver's license? Knowing that someone, not only has had the practice, but has also been "put through the test" and has obtained a driver's license, makes a huge difference in how comfortable we feel or if we are even willing to take the risk of riding with that person behind the wheel. National Certification of medical interpreters is much the same. It is imperative for medical interpreters to be qualified and their abilities recognized in order for patients and healthcare providers to feel safe with that interpreter "behind the wheel". Much like the driver who has the physical well-being of his passengers in his hands, the medical interpreter has the physical well-being of the patient in his. In both scenarios, people's lives are involved. Recognizing the ability of the medical interpreter to handle this vital role confidently and professionally is of utmost importance.

National Certification is now beginning to have, as well it should, a major impact in the healthcare field. Requiring this certification, ensures that the medical interpreter is of top quality, a trained professional. This special certification results in the recognition and acknowledgement of individuals who are willing to go the extra mile to certify that they are the best in their profession and ensures patients and healthcare providers that, as a medical interpreter, they take their responsibilities seriously. The healthcare provider can feel confident that what he needs and desires his patient to know, the patient will know and understand. The patient can feel confident that his questions, his concerns and his fears, will all be addressed and that he is being completely understood and cared for.

It has often been said that the role of an interpreter is regularly undervalued, especially by the monolingual community, and that they are not getting the recognition that they deserve. With National Certification, this is certainly beginning to change. Not only are healthcare professionals beginning to recognize that this is a vital and necessary profession, but also that as a professional, the medical interpreter needs to be recognized and compensated as such.

Medical interpreting has combined three of my personal passions – my love of people, my love of language and my love of the medical field. I am thoroughly enjoying my path to national certification. Learning the roles of the interpreter, the techniques of interpreting, the ethics involved, the note-taking techniques, the medical terminology in English and in the target language and all the other facets of medical interpreting is proving to be a truly enjoyable experience. Due to the thorough training involved in obtaining my accreditation, every day that passes I feel more ready and willing to meet the challenge of medical interpreting, confident in my ability to perform accurate, professional interpretation each time.

Thanks to National Certification, I look forward to the day, in the near future, that I can proudly and confidently say, "I am a Certified Medical Interpreter."

Making a Difference through National Certification

By Heidi Hobson

"You speak Spanish, right? Come and help me 'translate'!"

Oh, how many of us wish we could have collected at least a penny for every time we have heard this statement, or been spoken to in this way.

Being bilingual does not mean one can be an interpreter. We know this statement to be true as bilingual people ourselves, or do we?

I consider myself one of the few fortunate Hispanics that arrived in the US as a young adult, without the pressure of having to support family in the local area and abroad. So, I can very much sympathize with the hoards of us Hispanics that have had to face many difficult decisions as we leave behind our loved ones and our comforts for the "rat race" life in the US. So many of us have arrived having left behind our education and credentials; unable to transfer them over without a plethora of requirements, testing and lots of cash. But having disclaimed the previous, I wonder if we could all take a moment and with honesty ask ourselves: Why do we risk other peoples' lives in the process of 'translating' for them in areas in which we lack expertise?

In my opinion, this is where the National Certification will make a significant difference. This process will keep us each honest and will allow us to decide much more objectively, whether interpreting is the area in which we should be willing to market ourselves. Having taken the time to truly assess and be assessed by a group of our more experienced peers, and allow ourselves to consider whether or not we should be creatively thinking about other areas in which we can help our neighbor and make a living. There is no better tool, than to go through this testing process and face the facts in front of our very eyes. I am certain that if this is the case and it is regulated and required, many more of us will not be willing to put our fellow man in harm's way, on purpose. At least, that is my sincere hope.

Quite a few of us Medical Interpreters, have spent a lot of time, effort and monies on our craft, on this endeavor, on our passion, and are willing to continue to do so. We still get excited over the sight of a new batch of terms! The National Certification process is a sigh of relief and a very exciting time for us. Our hope through this process is also to be seen as true professionals. As members of a team in which, without us, the other members would not stand a chance.

As member of an elite group of people that has spent many hours in memorization, familiarization, enunciation, practice, charting and reading I applaud you. I thank you for elevating our craft to the level it should be. For allowing us to proudly say: I am a Certified Medical Interpreter.