

It's more than just a document.... It's recognition of an individual's devotion to a selfless profession.



**By Erin Kouknas
American Translation Partners Inc.**

It's more than just a document...

It is easy to assume that anyone can forgo a specific training course, learn the material thoroughly and pass an examination to obtain a paper document to be considered certified. We see this daily, where individuals are awarded certifications that determine they meet minimum standards in a particular area. Very seldom do people stop to look at the individual who is working hard to obtain this certification, what their motives are, and why they are driven to obtain a higher level of accreditation.

If you had asked me four years ago how I felt about interpreters, I would have just told you "I hear they make good money at the airport." This goes to show you how little I knew about the language industry. As a recent graduate ready to take on the world, I am lucky to say I landed my first job as an Interpreter Coordinator for

American Translation Partners, Inc. (ATP). It was at that time I was shown the “real world,” the world beyond my little suburban home. There is a great deal of beautiful culture within languages, magnificent lands, thousands of countries and, most importantly, interpreters and translators. I believe anyone who is fluent in several languages is incredibly intelligent and I commend them for being knowledgeable of something that I certainly am not. But, an interpreter is so much more than someone who speaks multiple languages. It takes an extraordinary individual to be capable of having all of the characteristics that a medical interpreter and translator possess.

Throughout my experience as a coordinator, I have a good understanding of all the expectations we have of our medical interpreters and translators. They are expected to stay on a balanced line, right in between protocols and professionalism, and should they ever stray, someone is right there letting them know they curved off of that line. They are continuously being critiqued, judged and reviewed, taught new procedures and expected to remember the ones that have been changed. These expectations could quickly have someone asking themselves, “why would you become an interpreter?” However, spend 10 minutes to get to know an interpreter, and the answer is crystal clear. Medical interpreters acquire a striking passion to help others. The dependence and trust a patient bestows upon their interpreter is an immense responsibility, which an interpreter should feel honored to receive. I personally like to consider them as “giving a voice” to those who cannot speak or “listening” for those who cannot hear. Because without their assistance there would be no communication flow between a patient and healthcare provider, and an individual’s health is extremely important. It is so important that in many cases an interpreter’s services is considered life saving. Although their acts are consistently courageous, they continuously remain calm, impartial and professional to stay in compliance with their code of ethics.

There are several memorable experiences I have been fortunate enough to encounter while coordinating for ATP. One I would like to share is in regards to the horrific 2010 earthquake that shook the country of Haiti. Our company was asked to translate important documents of high priority, so that Haitian hospital employees as well as Haitian community members could remain abundantly aware of the situation that was occurring to many of their families and friends.

A medical translator of ours graciously accepted this task, working nonstop from start to finish. Upon delivery, he thanked our company for allowing him to use his gift to help others and stated “this service was done at no charge.” I was personally overcome with admiration towards this man, who just gave countless hours of service out of the goodness of his heart. I also do not want to fail to mention the massive amounts of other selfless acts I have witnessed, including hundreds of times an interpreter has made themselves readily available for several days at a time, even weeks, because they have been informed there could be a slight chance their patient might have a medical emergency and need them.

As medical interpreters are becoming higher in demand, people are becoming more aware of their selfless profession. And most recently we are seeing more opportunities for medical interpreters to become officially certified; therefore, they are able to consider their profession more significant, as will the rest of society. It is similar to a police officer; they protect innocent civilians and risk their lives for the good of mankind. It is also similar to a school teacher, who strives to educate our children while providing comfort and protection for them to learn. And although any individual is capable of providing protection or education, it is those that undergo intensive training, difficult examination and hands on experience to receive a proper certification that society recognizes and rewards. It is now time to add medical interpreters onto the list of heroic professions.

The National Board of Certification for Medical Interpreters (National Board) understands how crucial medical interpreters and translators are for vulnerable patients who are unable to receive the treatment they deserve due to language barriers. That is why (National Board) is now offering a medical certification process that allows devoted interpreters an opportunity to receive acknowledgement of their honorable services. With all the hard work and the array of selfless qualities and services that a medical interpreter provides on a daily basis, this accreditation will be a true gift. Although it is a mere document stating they're qualified for their professional title, their passionate daily services speak for themselves. I am truly grateful to have met such selfless and innovative medical interpreters and translators.

August 1, 2011

Erin Kouknas

Interpreter Coordinator

American Translation Partners, Inc.