Becoming my Best as a Medical Interpreter
by Geri McClymont

I find my work as a medical interpreter to be always interesting, at times exciting, and usually very personally gratifying. The medical interpreting profession can also be taxing. Interpreting all communication between the patient and medical provider with one hundred percent accuracy, without a single omission or addition, for assignments that can last for hours, can be challenging. Consider additional factors such as the occasional rude receptionist, impatient doctor, emotionally stressed patient, very delicate medical diagnosis, being on your feet for long periods of time, driving through treacherous weather conditions, and often circling a hospital parking garage multiple times before finally finding a parking space just in time for your appointment.

I work as a medical interpreter because I love it. I love the fact that I am a bridge between the patient and the medical provider, relaying critical and even life-saving information back and forth between the two parties. I love the fact that I am an advocate for the patient, speaking up for him or her when necessary. I love knowing that what I do is making a difference in the lives of others. However, I have learned that in order to be the most effective medical interpreter, the very best that I can be, I must be proactive. The alternative not only shortchanges myself from performing to my full potential as an interpreter, but also shortchanges the patients and medical providers I serve from receiving the very best service they deserve from me.

Here’s what I’ve learned is essential to being my best as a medical interpreter:

**Be organized.** I have found that organization is critical to success in many areas of my life. As an interpreter, part of being organized is having a designated location for my resources for each day’s assignments. This means that before I head out the door each morning, I know exactly where to retrieve all I need for my workday. I have a black portfolio case which I always keep in the same place at home, and in which I keep all I need for each work day: assignment sheets, medical dictionary, notepad and pens, smart phone, and any other items I consider necessary for my work day. When I’m organized, I’m not wasting time or energy stressing about where something is; my time and energy can be funneled into my actual work. Until it became second nature, I posted a checklist on the inside of my front door to remind myself of what I needed to have in my case before I left for work each day. Most items never
leave my case, but on more than one occasion I had to return to the kitchen or bedroom to retrieve my smart phone before heading out the door. The checklist served its purpose in helping me leave my house relaxed and ready to face the challenges of a day in the hospital.

**Give myself enough time.** I have learned to never assume there will be little traffic and no accidents on any given day and at any given time of day when I’m preparing to go to an assignment, and likewise, to never assume there will be plenty of parking spaces when I arrive to a hospital. Although we generally expect rush hour and lunch time to be the busiest times on the road, accidents happen anywhere and at any time, and if I encounter one, as the signs on the highway will tell me, I can “expect delays”. And I no longer assume that if a hospital parking garage is huge, there will always be a spot for me. There is a reason the parking garage is so big! I would rather give myself more time on the road and arrive early to an assignment than give myself less time and risk arriving late.

**Keep the car in check.** As an interpreter, I spend a fair amount of time on the road, travelling from one assignment to the next, often from one side of town to another, and sometimes farther. Not long ago, I drove to an assignment that was normally a 40 minute drive on the interstate, but because of a bad snow blizzard, it took me more than twice as long as usual to get there and back. Because I rely so much on my vehicle to get me to multiple locations throughout each day and because I often travel through treacherous road conditions, it is imperative to make sure my car is trustworthy. Keeping my tires in check (maintaining air pressure at optimum levels improves gas mileage), regular oil changes and general maintenance are musts. I find weekends to be the most convenient time to check up on my car as well as to fill up on gas for the week.

**Load up on the resources.** As interpreters, we work across a wide range of specialties and, regardless of our level of education, we will inevitably come across unfamiliar medical terminology from time to time. It is not unusual for me to have a cardiology, gastrointestinal, and orthopedic appointment all in one day. While mixing things up keeps things interesting, it is always a reminder that I need to stay fresh and current on medical terminology across all specialties. One of my favorite sites for researching and reviewing medical conditions, symptoms and treatments is www.mayoclinic.com. The two bilingual dictionaries I use most are the *Spanish-English/English-Spanish Medical Dictionary, third edition* by Glenn T. Rogers, MD (I take this one to all my assignments because of its smaller size) and the *Spanish-English/English-Spanish Medical Dictionary, fourth edition* by Onyria Herrera McElroy, PhD and Lola L. Grabb, M.A. (this one also includes great images). I have larger, more comprehensive bilingual dictionaries at home which I mostly use for translation work but which are also excellent for cross-referencing when reviewing terms before interpreting assignments.

**Live a healthy lifestyle.** This goes without saying because we all know it’s important, but doing it is not always easy. Living a healthy lifestyle often requires more planning and more time. It is easy to argue that I don’t have time to make a salad, exercise, or get more sleep, but I now argue that I can’t afford to **not** do these things. The price we pay for not taking care of our bodies is often a high one. I have come to view taking care of my body as an investment that will bring great returns, including a higher energy level, a greater sense of well-being and confidence, improved health, and more productivity on the job. I have learned to plan simple, healthy meals and have found an exercise plan that works for me. I do my best to get quality sleep each night by setting a bedtime for myself and trying to stick to it. Part of a healthy lifestyle is having a strong support system. The value of a few good friends to talk to and turn to for emotional, spiritual and psychological support is invaluable.

**Find my place of peace.** As medical interpreters, we often find ourselves interpreting very delicate information: a doctor telling a patient that after viewing test results, his suspicion of cancer proved correct; a mother receiving the news that her unborn child has a serious heart condition and may require
surgery hours after birth. Because we are human, we will be impacted at some level by these types of situations we are called to interpret for. While we are expected to remain composed during all interpreting scenarios, it is our responsibility to find a way to de-stress after difficult assignments so that we can continue to perform our jobs as well as possible. I find quietness at the end of a long day to be very therapeutic. Some days, a long run outdoors is just what I need.

Keep on learning… always. I love learning about just about anything, but I find it is easy to get so caught up in my work as an interpreter that I forget to stay connected and involved with my colleagues and local professional organizations. I have to discipline myself to stay involved, attend seminars, webinars and conferences relevant to my profession. I have discovered it is not difficult to find free, online educational medical webinars through professional associations, and that traveling to a conference can be more fun with a colleague or small group of other interpreters. There is always something new worth learning. I know that my knowledge and professionalism is paying off when I find myself applying what I learn on the job and growing as a professional!

While working as a medical interpreter is very rewarding, like any other profession, it has its shares of challenges. However, there are steps we can take to limit the amount of additional, unnecessary stress we allow to influence and distract us in our day-to-day work. Likewise, there are steps we can take to help us grow and blossom in our careers so that we can become the very best medical interpreters that we can be. Our clients deserve nothing less from us!

This article was submitted by Geri McClymont, an independent English-Spanish medical interpreter and translator based in Colorado Springs, CO and Secretary of the Colorado Chapter of IMIA.