



FIRST MEDICAL INTERPRETER PASSES THE NATIONAL BOARD WRITTEN EXAMS IN CONNECTICUT!

*Interview with Riyad Al-Jammalah,
Arabic Medical Interpreter, Connecticut, 1/25/2010*
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Riyad Al-Jammalah,
Medical Interpreter for the U.S.
Department of Defense

Riyad Al-Jammalah is the first interpreter in the United States to take the National Board Written exams and pass it. First, he is an Iraqi doctor just came to the States before 6 months as a special immigrant. He worked for U.S. Department of Defense as a locally hired Iraqi interpreter since 2004. His work included different fields of translation/interpretation but mainly, and for most of the time, as an Arabic medical interpreter. He was a medical student in Baghdad when I started working as an interpreter for U.S. Army and Air Force on 2004. He graduated on 2007 as a medical doctor. Unfortunately, he couldn't do my medical residency in Iraq because of his work for U.S. Government which put him under high risk.

Fortunately enough, he got the opportunity to come to the United States as an immigrant through a special visa program for Iraqi interpreters made by U.S. Government. He made it to the States on August 2009 and is resettling at New Haven, CT. Here he had to face a different reality, how to get a job with the bad economic crisis that hit the US. To be a doctor again I have to re-certify my medical degree through passing the United States Medical Licensing Exams (USMLE) and that takes time and a lot of money. So I decided to look at a job that I am good at and the medical interpreter work is the best match. I searched online and found different types of interpretation companies with different pre-requisites and different "subjective" assessment tests. I hoped that I could find an institution or association that has a standard assessment that can apply all across the States. And there I found IMIA and the National Board of Certification for Medical Interpreters. It is a great project to have a well-organized and comprehensive standard assessment for medical interpreters. This set an "objective" assessment that will easily differentiate the qualified medical interpreters.

What do you most love about the medical interpreting profession?

Being an interpreter means a lot you are the tool of communication between two parties and being a medical interpreter is a hard job and at the same time an important job. You are dealing with the patient's health, need to be precise and accurate, stay professional and treat all the information we get as confidential so it's very important. It's a different experience each time. You get to see different stories from different people.

How did your medical degree help with your interpreting work?

Fortunately for me my medical education was in English but I had a hard time understanding it... I had to translate a lot of the medical terminology into Arabic. This was very helpful as it gave me a good general idea of when to use the appropriate terms while interpreting.

How did you learn about national medical interpreter certification?

The first thing I did was start searching about medical interpreting while I was still in Iraq. I knew I needed credentials to work and I didn't know which country I was going so I needed a national certification. I saw that companies and educational programs have what they call certification programs, but they all differed a lot and were company certifications. I wanted



What compelled you to take the exam as soon as it became available?

I wanted to partake in it because it was very new and the fact that it was national was a plus so I tried to do it as soon as I had the opportunity to do that.

Did you find the registration process cumbersome or difficult?

(The registration process is the process of verifying if a candidate meets the pre-requisites to sit for the written exam) Yes, for Iraqis a registration is an obscure idea. When I went to the National Board of Certification for Medical interpreters website at www.certifiedmedicalinterpreters.org. But I didn't have any major problems.

What was your experience like in taking the written exam?

It was an interesting test, related to the medical interpreting job. **Why?** Because interpreters will face these situations and topics and terminology as medical interpreting.

What did you most like about it?

The best part of it was that the subject-matter was clear and there were reference materials to study on the IMIA website which was very helpful.

What did you least like about it?

I didn't get my final score but only that I passed. I say this because many are afraid because the passing score of 75% is high. Those that passed can't relay to colleagues their score. If you fail you have to wait 3 months, which is a very long time. That could prevent some interpreters from doing it. Since it is a brand new exam, many interpreters will not be familiar with the testing techniques.

Did you feel the administration process was neutral and secure?

Yes. Of course. The test administrators. I did the pilot and the final exam in different sites and both were very secure.

Did you feel the National Board Written Certification Exam is fair?

Right now it's very fair and doesn't discriminate between interpreters.

What would you say to other medical interpreters that are considering becoming certified?

It's a great thing to have national certification. This certification will show that you are qualified nationally as a medical interpreter. Nobody can challenge that or take that away from you. Interpreters have to do it because it's the right thing. As soon as they get it they will notice or feel it's importance.

How does it feel to be a pioneer for the field?

It's very interesting I am honored to be the first one and to participate in this project! I was so excited when I read the pre-requisites for applying for that certification and how I have a chance to take its assessment to be certified as a medical interpreter. During the period of waiting for the written exam, I was struggling with the difficulties of the expensive life especially when I have no job at all. I participated in the pilot exam on November and I was barely able to pay the amount of money required for the written exam. I took the written exam as soon I could do it because I knew that it is the best and the most practical way to have a standard, nation-wide certificate that allows me to apply for a medical interpreter job anywhere in the States. It is a great honor for me to be a part of this newly emerged certification process and I think it is good to be the first of many! I wish all the success to the certification process and I highly appreciate the efforts that made this project a reality.