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National Certification for Medical Interpreters

Over the past several years, the Medical Interpreter Association, language service agencies, as well as hospitals, have been advocating for the approval of requiring national certification for medical interpreters. Most of these associations and communities feel that this is a necessity in order to improve the quality of healthcare facilities among all regions of the United States.

Since the introduction of this concept, several conferences have been held throughout the states to discuss this issue in order to acknowledge the opinions of the interpreters themselves, members of the medical community, language service companies, educators, and political figures. Approximately 80% of those who have attended these forums have agreed that it is essential for the nation to require all medical interpreters to be nationally certified in order to practice within this field.

Subsequently, for an interpreter to receive certification, he/she must pass both a written and oral exam that deals with knowledge of the subject, the medical field, and its cultural barriers. Once an interpreter receives this certification, he/she is obligated to continue with their education by attending courses and conferences in order to remain up-to-date with this occupation and the changes that it may undergo over time.

There are several reasons why healthcare officials demand that their interpreters become nationally certified. One reason is that society is continuously growing with diversity due to the increase in immigration in which over 60 million individuals speak another language than English at home. Also, this policy will ensure that patients with limited English abilities will be well cared for when entering a medical facility without any form of miscommunication due to language barriers. Above all, this will draw emphasis on the important role that interpreters play in the medical field.

However, in order for this policy to be put into action, almost all of those involved must come to an agreement. Some common concerns about passing this law are the costs, the requirements for passing the exam, that this exam should suggest more than one degree of certification, as well as the frequency of when, where and how often this testing should take place.

The first conference was held in May of 2007 in Boston, Massachusetts to discuss this matter. Boston was selected to be the place for the first forum because it is a metropolitan area that is constantly growing with language and culture diversity. Like many cities with a diverse population, there is a need for certified interpreters in order to prevent any conflicts with interpreters delivering wrong information to the doctor and/or patient, which can lead to misdiagnosis or even death.

For example, an incident occurred in Boston when an 18 year-old Hispanic male who spoke very little English went to the hospital because he said he was “intoxicado.” “Intoxicado” is a false cognate in English meaning “food poisoning.” The inexperienced interpreter told the doctor to treat the patient for a drug overdose. The patient was in treatment for 36 hours when they realized that the interpreter had made a serious mistake.

By requiring all medical interpreters to become nationally certified, patients who speak another language will be assured that they will be given the best treatment for their condition. However, the interpreting community must come to an agreement about how the exam will be formatted and what a certified interpreter must engage in afterwards in order for him/her to remain up-to-date within this crucial field. Other conferences are being by the National Council for Interpreting Health Care (NCIHC) to discuss this matter in more detail.

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