

If you aspire to work as a professional interpreter with the NHS and other medical settings, you will need several things.

To be a paid interpreter, and to ensure you are delivering a professional, high-quality service the first step is successfully completing an interpreter qualification, such as the [Level 3 Certificate in Community Interpreting](#) (CCI). This qualification is nationally recognised as the entry level standard for paid public service interpreting jobs in not only medical interpreting contexts but also contexts such as job centres (applying for benefits, looking for work and adult education), education (school visits, discussions with special needs pupils, parents' meetings etc.), social services (home visit welfare checks, assessment of people in need etc.), housing (helping Limited English Speakers (LES) in finding accommodation through government services etc.) and more.

There is no need to do Community Interpreting level 1 or 2 before taking level 3. Firstly, because levels 1 and 2 are really only for volunteer interpreters working for charities. Secondly because you do not need a prior qualification to study Level 3 and lastly because the Community Interpreting Level 3 is designed to teach you everything you need to know to become a paid interpreter, in the role of a community interpreter, even if you are a complete beginner.

### What skills do I need?

While you'll need to have a high degree of fluency in two or more languages, this – or indeed complete bilingualism – isn't sufficient when it comes to carrying out the role of a medical interpreter successfully. However, excellent language skills are an essential building block upon which to build. Even if you are fluent in two or more languages, it is likely that you will not have an expansive knowledge of medical terminology so you will still need to expand your vocabulary of the medical specialism, in both languages, to be successful.

In addition to language skills, you will need to build or develop your skills and abilities in memory, using synonyms, paraphrasing, interpreting accurately, note taking, using tone, register and cultural references effectively, assertiveness, clarification, learning to be a consecutive interpreter and more. If you need guidance on these areas, the easiest and most effective way is to enrol yourself on a [Level 3 Certificate in Community Interpreting](#) course.

## Interpreting Accurately

One of the most crucial factors for interpreters is to interpret as accurately as possible and keep your interpreting as true to the original speech as possible. This is especially true in medical situations, where you may find yourself partly responsible for the life or death of a patient. If you give the incorrect information, misinterpret instructions for taking medication, or do not accurately convey the details of the next appointment correctly this can have grave consequences for the patient. It is also important that interpreters realise that they are neither the service provider (e.g., doctor) nor the patient, and that they are only there to interpret what is said by these parties – never to give their own thoughts, advice or opinions.

## Note taking

Note taking skills can be one of the most valuable for a medical interpreter and can help to ensure accuracy. If you are in a formal and/or time-pressured scenario where asking for repetition or clarification (unless strictly required) might be discouraged, it is imperative to have practiced your short hand note taking skills. Devising your own system of notes and symbols will take time and practice but it is something you can work on alone, honing and streamlining the process over time. It's a very personal process and one which you will need to work on yourself, as everyone's brain works in a different way and what might make sense in shorthand to one-person would-be nonsense to another. There are a number of useful books that provide excellent guidance on note taking, including 'Note-Taking for Public Service Interpreters' by Kirsty Heimerl-Moggan & Vanessa Ifeoma John. It is available and highly recommended from Interp-Right Training Consultancy.

## How can I prepare and practice?

If you are serious about becoming a medical interpreter, it is vital to do as much background reading as possible, create glossaries, imagine hypothetical scenarios and how they might play out, and perhaps even contact other experienced interpreters for tips (directly if you have any mentors or through using forums such as Proz.com, translatorscafe.com or groups, communities and pages in LinkedIn or Facebook. You can find a lot of useful information for free on Learnqual's own Facebook and LinkedIn pages.

Another great way would be to practice with friends and family – for example, ask someone to play the role of a doctor and then you can

translate their questions to a hypothetical service user. It can help you to build your knowledge to create role plays, writing both the Service Provider (e.g., a doctor) and LES parts in the relevant languages), including some specialist terminology. You can then use that with a friend or relative and practice interpreting each of the passages of speech.

Get creative – if you aspire to work in medical interpreting then how about watching a few episodes of Casualty or 24 Hours in A&E dubbed into your working language? Lateral thinking will get you far in this job.

### Where can I find work?

Once you have a qualification, you can use that certificate to work as a community interpreter and enrol for paid work. As in the case of any industry, most of your job-hunting can be carried out from the comfort of your home. Once you have your CV and cover letter ready, head to Google and LinkedIn and get searching. It's more or less a matter of putting in your working language(s), your location and 'interpreting'. You should then be presented with a large number of agencies and/or individuals with whom you can get in contact. You can also search for agencies by their professional name: 'Language Service Providers'. Persistence and patience are crucial – there will be occasions you will be told that your CV will be kept on file, or that there are no current opportunities, or perhaps you will hear nothing at all. As such you should cast your net as wide as possible, apply to as many agencies as you can and follow up with agencies who showed any interest further down the line. It's often the case that you might only get offered work literally 12-18 months after sending in your CV, so never say never and don't give up too easily.

### What situations and scenarios may I find myself in?

By obtaining this qualification you open a huge number of doors for yourself in the world of medical interpreting. Having worked in this industry for a number of years, here are just a few of the scenarios you might find interpreting for:

- Interpreting between a doctor and the parents of their critically ill child.
- Interpreting for all ages of patients for:
  - o Diabetes
  - o COPD and Asthma

- o Dermatology
- o Musculoskeletal problems
- o Hypertension
- o Cardiac problems
- o Stroke
- o Chronic illnesses
- o Cancer
- o Flu

To learn more about the 'top ten' reasons for visiting the GP, you can see our blog entitled 'Top 10 Reasons for visiting the doctor' further down this page.

Of course, as a level 3 interpreter, you can also interpret in other specialisms so you may also find yourself interpreting for:

- Helping a service user apply for universal credit
- Attending a parents' meeting in a primary school
- Working with a solicitor and an asylum seeker on their asylum case

As you can see these span a great deal of different experiences and all pose their own idiosyncrasies and approaches.

## Dealing with challenges

Nothing can prepare you for the reality of an unpredictable setting with potentially extremely emotional content and service users. As I'm sure you can imagine, in hospitals and at doctors surgeries you can get a full range of emotions – people upset because they are in pain, those who have just received a bad diagnosis or bad news, those who have lost loved ones, happy parents who have just been told that they are pregnant, people who are excited at seeing a relative and those who are pleased to be recovering. It is, therefore, an important skill to know how to deal with being confronted by unpredictable scenarios – the confidence to ask for

clarification and repetition, the belief in yourself that no matter what happens you are a good interpreter.

Adaptability is one of the most important skills or abilities in becoming a medical interpreter – you never know what will happen during a session, and you may only be given very limited information to prepare and research the subject beforehand. In the case of telephone interpreting, there is no way to predict what subject the next call will be about, so you need to have a good base knowledge, well organised and comprehensive glossaries, and a positive 'can-do' attitude.

### Where can I acquire an interpreting qualification?

As mentioned, the first step to becoming a medical interpreter is to acquire a relevant interpreting qualification. There are several different providers that you can acquire this from. [The LearnQ Level 3 Certificate in Community Interpreting](#) explains much of the content in more detail, you are provided with activities and exercises to develop your skills and knowledge and you have the opportunity to interact with your tutor and other students.

If you would like more information, please complete an enquiry form or send your name and telephone number to [admin@learnq.com](mailto:admin@learnq.com) and a member of our helpful team will be happy to provide more information..

By: Jack Taylor, Interpreter & Assessor