



Don't Just Toss 'Em a Fish!

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I think we do new medical transcriptionists and students a great disservice when we respond to their on-line discussion board requests for assistance with very basic dictated words and phrases. My friend thinks it is wonderful that newcomers feel comfortable enough to bring their questions to the on-line forum. I, on the other hand, feel that we are, in effect, offering them a fish when what we really need to do is *teach them to fish*.

Along with other qualified MTs, I have been guilty of galloping to the rescue, anxious to demonstrate my supposedly superior skills and knowledge by providing answers to newcomers' questions, even though I realized that I was essentially placing a temporary patch on a problem that required far more than a one-time answer.

Lately, when seeing newcomer questions that demonstrate a total lack of basic knowledge, I have more often e-mailed the individuals privately with gentle suggestions that they consider additional instruction, work toward building an appropriate library, and/or seek an appropriate mentor who can assist with difficult dictation by actually listening. In most cases, I get a response thanking me for my suggestions but stating a necessity for immediate employment and pleading lack of funds for additional resources prior to gaining that employment. (Would this be an acceptable reason for failing to pursue appropriate training in any other profession?)

Not surprisingly, continued perusal of the on-line forum in the following days or weeks reveals the same naive individual asking for assistance with unfamiliar terminology that "sounds like," followed by a collection of total nonsense words. One cannot help but know that when faced with the fact that the tran-

scription being submitted is totally unacceptable to the employer or client, the discouraged beginners will bewail the fact that they are unable to find anyone willing to "take a chance" on them, and still more questions will be posed that demonstrate little or no understanding of what it takes to be successful (or even employed) in this difficult and challenging field.

While we can encourage employers to provide opportunities to well-prepared individuals entering the field of medical transcription, we must recognize that *no employer has an obligation to spend valuable time in an attempt to educate and train people who have not first made sufficient efforts to obtain necessary education on their own*.

Fishing Lessons

Perhaps the greatest favor we can do for the naive newcomers is to quit babying them and say it right out: *We care about you and want you to be a success in this profession. However, it is apparent that you do not have the necessary background in terminology, practice, and basic understanding to do this job. We strongly advise that you seek additional instruction and experience and be prepared to make the necessary investment in time and resource material. After all, these are patient medical records you are transcribing, and your lack of knowledge could easily create a life-or-death situation!*

Do I sound harsh and unfeeling? Does it appear that I don't believe in extending a helping hand to newcomers in the field of medical transcription? Well, nothing could be further from the truth. I love medical transcription and treasure medical transcriptionists, particularly those who are just entering the profession. If I could, I would gather "newbies" around

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me like woolly lambs and share with them all the wonderful things I have been privileged to learn in my five decades of transcription.

I would take students slowly and carefully through the systems of the body, teaching them anatomy and helping them to understand how the body works. I would introduce them to the wonderful language of medicine, helping them to recognize and understand the words and phrases that are used by those who dictate the medical record. And, perhaps most important, I would help them to understand the *real world* of medical transcription, wherein dwell incredibly hard-working people with an immense knowledge.

Looking for Education

We must depend upon quality educational programs to provide students access to the knowledge and skills necessary to perform medical transcription. And we hope and pray that each person who wants to enter this fascinating profession will recognize the need for quality education and seek out a program that can provide it.

However, the world seems to be full of programs that *claim* to teach medical transcription but are totally inadequate when it comes to preparing students for actually performing the duties of a medical transcriptionist. Many so-called medical transcription courses are only incidental parts of programs directed at another profession (i.e., medical assistant, medical office specialist, court reporter, etc.) and do not include the essential elements for training of even an entry-level medical transcriptionist. Many other courses that *do* place major emphasis on medical transcription are so abbreviated that they cannot meet the students' needs within the time frame of their programs. Is it any wonder that individuals who complete these programs lack a basic understanding of the human body and the language that documents its care?

Prospective students are bombarded with ads from courses that promise the moon but provide little in the way of practical instruction. One school that produces dazzling information packets offers students a standard cassette player (with no headphones or foot pedal) and only a minimal number of professionally dictated (read *canned*) reports to transcribe, while assuring the unwary student that he or she will be prepared to step right into the hospital environment or even to (shudder!) work at home. Imagine the student's shock and surprise later when encountering not only unfamiliar and imperfect dictation, but also the expanding technology involved with transcription.

Perhaps the greatest injustice perpetrated on unsuspecting students is the promise of immediate readiness for an at-home transcription business. Armed with only minimal exposure to the medical language and no knowledge whatsoever of business

practices, these trusting individuals throw themselves on the mercy of the computer bulletin boards, where they receive a melange of well-meaning advice that unfortunately does not take into account the newcomer's lack of basic skills. And there we are again, offering piecemeal solutions to those who are trying to build a career without a solid foundation.

Seeking a Resolution

Many excellent transcriptionists who have been practicing for 20 or more years received only on-the-job training, myself included. We persevered because there was no classroom study available, and we grew as the profession grew. Unfortunately, some of us are still finding areas in which we wish we had further training, but books are now available for us to correct our deficiencies.

That we were able to achieve success in this difficult and challenging profession is probably in large measure due to the fact that there were fewer medical specialties when we started out, and we were not faced with constantly changing technology, at least not until the 1980s. Few of us worked at home, and we thus had the opportunity to consult with each other and to grow together.

Times have changed, and it now appears that the best step we can take with an individual who wants to become an MT is *never* to suggest that he or she can learn transcription simply by working under the tutelage of another or by purchasing a few books and depending on a computer spellchecker.

We should urge aspiring MTs to carefully evaluate their own current skills. Is he a way-above-average speller? Is she able to quickly and accurately apply the rules of English grammar and punctuation? Does he love to study and learn and have an endless fascination with language? Does she have a basic understanding of computers and current word-processing software? If some of these individuals are considering the establishment of medical transcription businesses, have they first learned about developing business plans and explored pricing and marketing strategies? Are they familiar with the medical community in their locale?

A quick look into their motives is also in order. Do they have a real desire for a long-term career, or are they thinking of medical transcription as a part-time job or a way to earn a quick buck?

We owe it to aspiring MTs to tell them in no uncertain terms that they need to seek out appropriate educational programs (the key word here being *appropriate*) and not settle for any program that offers less than the absolute max, including instruction in anatomy, disease processes, pharmacology, transcription technology, and professional practices, fortified by hours and hours (and more hours) of transcribing **actual physician dictation** (*not* dictation that is prepared by a professional reader or simply narrated by an instructor), sequenced by body system. Programs that properly utilize material such as that provided in *The SUM Program for Medical Transcription* are able to offer these essential ingredients.

Prospective students should be urged to inquire carefully into the **quality of instruction** being offered, never settling for courses designed or taught by folks who may be business

English teachers or medical assisting instructors, no matter how well-versed these individuals may be in their own chosen fields. If the student elects to enroll in a home-study or self-directed study program, the same careful analysis of instructional materials and support personnel should be carried out. If the program does not use *SUM Program* materials, what type of materials do they use? What record does the program have for graduating employable students?

And, most importantly, we need to help the aspiring MT take a **realistic view** of the profession and what it can offer to one who approaches it with proper preparation, never sugar-coating the many difficulties that will be encountered. Medical transcription work is hard and can be incredibly taxing, both physically, mentally, and emotionally. A part of that realistic view should be acceptance of the fact that one who plans to document patient health records must **work for a time in a healthcare environment** before attempting to work alone.

There are, of course, those who would argue this point, reasoning that many transcription departments and physician offices are poorly supervised or staffed by unqualified individuals. And there are many individuals who have managed to be successful without this experience. Nevertheless, **exposure to the medical record** and all its complexities is essential. The aspiring MT needs to understand the importance of each entry he or she may contribute to that record, be it clinic note, letter, history and physical, operative report, or any of the myriad reports in the patient record. Even if the potential student's ultimate goal is to operate a home business, knowledge of the "big picture" will be essential to success.

Teach Them How to Fish

Don't be *too* kind, and don't assure unprepared MTs that they will "get it" if they just keep working at it. If we take that approach, we reinforce the widely held misconception that medical transcription is nothing but an easily learned keyboarding skill. (After all, don't you just *type* what you hear?) Encourage those interested in becoming MTs, as well as those who have entered the field unprepared, to take the same approach to education for medical transcription as they would to any other professional field.

If you are in a position to suggest appropriate training, do not be afraid to do so. Stress the advantages of programs you know of that include the necessary features for success. When met with protests regarding program cost, emphasize that the individual seeking a career must be prepared to make the necessary investment in time and money or else consider some other field of endeavor. *Education in medical transcription is truly a case of "pay now or pay later" in lost income, lost jobs, lost clients, and lost professional reputation.* We should also recognize the fact that the unprepared newcomer may well contribute negatively to the image and reputation of our entire profession.

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Few medical transcriptionists of my acquaintance would ever turn away from the needy "newbie," but it is important that we provide our assistance in a way that emphasizes the essential nature of adequate preparation for a profession that provides a significant contribution to quality healthcare.

Be honest with those who seek to enter this profession. Provide a true picture of what is needed. Help them identify and use the quality tools that will last them a lifetime. Don't just toss them a fish!

Don't forget, when you encounter a newcomer to our profession who has taken the high road—completed a quality educational program, built a solid reference library, sought out appropriate mentors, researched necessary business practices—(in short, *prepared*), offer a well-deserved handshake along with your enthusiastic assistance. This is a person who has learned to fish!

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