

FOILING P.T. BARNUM (SOME THOUGHTS ON CHOOSING AN EDUCATIONAL PATH IN MEDICAL TRANSCRIPTION)

by Sidney K. Moormeister, Ph.D.

It happens more and more frequently these days: I open my e-mail to find inquiries so plaintive that I wish I could cry. So many voices, so many questions, so many people imagine (and I use that word intentionally and emphatically) that medical transcription is the new career nirvana. After all, you can work at home (in your jammies, no less—no corporate pinstripes necessary), making plenty of money to satisfy your (and your family's) every need.

There is some pretty hefty mythmaking going on in the world of transcription education (and what passes for it). Perhaps some words offered from this "old salt" with 37 years of experience can help those people seriously considering medical transcription to separate the come-ons from the truth and make an informed decision about their education. If this small offering can save even a few people the grief of losing their money, of having their hopes dashed against the realities of today's transcription marketplace, and instead assist in making a rational, sane, and informed decision about education, it will be worth the time it has taken to set these words to paper.

First, the myths. There are three myths that must be dispelled.

1. Medical transcription is a source of "easy money." Shockingly, some people believe this. Much like carnival barkers, various "schools" hold public meetings that are reminiscent of a scene from *Elmer Gantry*. The "bait" is offered ("You can make forty thousand dollars a year while working at home in your jammies."). People investigating our profession are taken in by the promise of easy money. The sad news is that there is no golden goose; golden eggs are in perilously short supply these days. Stop and think about it. Use rational thought and reasoning. If medical transcription were so easy that anyone could do it, wouldn't more people be doing it? Wouldn't the critical shortage of truly excellent, qualified transcriptionists cease to exist? Medical transcription is mighty hard work. It is challenging intellectually and it is hard on the body (just ask my chiropractor). So the first step in making an informed choice is to leave your illusions of easy money behind.

2. It doesn't matter where you go to school; you can get a good medical transcription education anywhere. Another tactic of the less-than-reputable schools is to tell you to make your choice on price alone. There's a reason that wise people

like my daddy taught me that you get what you pay for. The schools (and I use that term loosely) that advertise heavily in the popular press (including the tabloids) place their emphasis on the fact that they are the cheapest. What they do not tell you is that their education is the shoddiest, and likely no one—certainly not a reputable national—will give you a shot at testing once you have your newly-minted "diploma" in your hand. Is it really such a bargain? Sadly, the people who are "investing" their money are probably the very people who can least likely afford to lose it. And yet I hear not a plaintive voice, but a veritable chorus: "We chose the XYZ school because it was the cheapest." How sad. Inevitably people from these schools end up going to another, more reputable school to learn what the first school did not teach them. How cost- and time-effective is that?

3. You can always learn the "old fashioned way"—on the job. The ways of learning transcription have changed drastically in the last ten years. When I was a grad student (back in the ancient Sixties), a hospital willingly took me on, based solely on my premedical education and the fact that I was a lightning-fast typist. A kind woman took me under her proverbial wing, taught me all she knew, and the rest is history. Alas, there are no more opportunities like that. Hospitals now outsource the work, and employers expect you to arrive at the workplace ready to sit down and belt out those lines. Transcription supervisors have neither the time nor the inclination to handhold. They, like the transcriptionists, have production quotas, which hang like the Sword of Damocles over their heads. It is therefore more important than ever to choose the right venue for obtaining one's education.

Having painted the picture of today's transcription workplace, allow me to offer questions to ask as you pursue your education. (In forensic medicine, it is often the case that asking the right questions can provide more valuable information than making declaratory statements; the same is true for one seeking to become a transcriptionist.)

1. Where are your graduates working? Can you give me the names of two or three grads who would be willing to share their experience with me? Even if the school is

unwilling to provide names of graduates, surely they can provide names of nationals, hospitals, and clinics who have hired them. Call the recruiters of several of the large nationals (Medquist, Spheris, Transcend, etc.) and ask them if they hire graduates from the school you are considering. What has been their experience with their graduates? Would they consider allowing you to test after you have successfully completed the course?

2. How long have you been in business? Are you a private entity? A sole proprietorship? Who are the principals? How are your instructors chosen? Ask probing questions. You are about to embark on a journey in which you will spend thousands of dollars and countless hours of your time. You want to invest them wisely. What credentials do the principals and instructors hold? Check to make sure that all credential information given is correct and current. Are the people with whom you will be dealing representing themselves accurately?

3. Do your financial homework. Call the Better Business Bureau and the Department of Business Regulation for the locality in which the school operates. Have there been complaints? Have they been resolved to the satisfaction of all parties?

4. What form(s) of financial aid do you offer? Many very reputable schools do offer some form of payment plan or loan program. Many times a “first choice” school is not as unattainable as it might seem at the outset. Remember that you are making an *investment* in yourself and in your future. This is just as much an *investment* as is a new house or car. It is perhaps a more important investment, because, properly done, it will keep on giving as long as you want to use it. How often I have been sad because those who could least afford it quite literally threw their money away. A careful check of financial aid programs might have enabled them to attend a legitimate school in the first place rather than having to redo their education.

5. How accessible are your instructors and by what means? E-mail only? Are telephone calls allowed? In the case of a serious problem, is there someone who can guide you through it? I have never been a fan of the “self-graded” system of learning; how can you teach yourself what you do not know? (I recall a difficult physics class in my long-ago past; a kind teaching assistant with a gift for explanation saved me. I never could have figured out the arcane mysteries of that science with an answer key only!)

6. Does your program use authentic physician dictation such as in *The SUM Program*? You want to be certain that what you will be transcribing is actual physician dictation. Many programs use scripts read by actors. That does not work; you are *not* going to be transcribing for actors; you are going to be transcribing for physicians. You need to become familiar with their dictation, with its unique challenges and nuances from day one. In my opinion, the HPI SUM Program is far and

You want to be certain that what you will be transcribing [in school] is actual physician dictation. Many programs use scripts read by actors. That does not work; you are not going to be transcribing for actors; you are going to be transcribing for physicians. You need to become familiar with their dictation, with its unique challenges and nuances from day one.

away the best method of doing this. I could not recommend any program that does not utilize actual physician dictation.

7. What type of follow-up does the program offer? Can you “retake” any portions of the course with which you have difficulty? How many tries are you given to pass the final? What you are seeking to do here is to draw up a sort of “road map” and resource bank for your education—and beyond.

8. Utilize the wisdom of those to whom I affectionately refer as “old salts.” Those of us who have been in this business for more than twenty years have seen changes aplenty; most of us have gotten well-connected throughout our careers, and we have also heard our share of the scuttlebutt. If the Acme Fly-By-Night-School of Transcription Success routinely rips people off, one of us is likely to know about it.

Medical transcription education is challenging and exciting; it has also become a big business. There are many wonderful schools out there whose staff care deeply about their students—deeply enough to make them work hard, deeply enough to provide rigorous, exhaustive programs that will put them through their paces in preparation for The Main Event—that first transcription job. It is your job and your duty to yourself to seek out the best possible education for yourself. I welcome you to our fascinating world, I pray that you will choose well and wisely, and I wish you all the best.

Sidney K. Moormeister, Ph.D., holds doctoral degrees in forensic sciences and forensic psychology. After 20 years in consulting practice in San Francisco, she now resides in Salt Lake City, where she is an advocate for the rights of the disabled and homeless populations. She is writing a children's book in French. Her secret desire is to own an alligator. E-mail: francis@techguy.net

