

In whose hands

by Jennifer Alexander

Getting this far has been stressful enough: obtaining appointment details, navigating strange transport systems. Now, in pain and unsure what will happen to you in this hospital, your anxiety is increasing. Nurses have bustled round making reassuring noises and doctors have discussed you with serious expressions, talking in firm-sounding but unintelligible words. You feel faint and have a headache, but haven't been able to tell anyone. You are to be operated on soon, yet still, the risks and details of the procedure are not clear to you. It may sound like some dystopian nightmare but it's not - it's just that you are in a foreign country and you don't speak the language well enough for this. It wasn't part of your plan to become ill here.

Scenarios like this, far-fetched as it may sound, unfold all over the UK all the time: in our hospitals, clinics, police stations, council offices and courtrooms. Those who do not have sufficient English to fully understand and express themselves - all are entitled to the services of an interpreter for these key and complicated discussions. The little-known army attending to this problem are known as Public Service Interpreters (NB. they are never "translators" - a translator works with the written word.)



PSIs have a complex and demanding job - and, when everything goes as it should, also a fascinating and rewarding one. The PSI is a vital link allowing trials, operations, consultations, assessments and meetings of all sorts to go ahead. The vast majority are native speakers of other languages who have come to live in this country, although a number are native English speakers with foreign language skills. Knowing a language, however, is merely the first step towards becoming an interpreter - it needs highly specialised vocabulary, sector knowledge and skills and techniques specific to the role requiring much study and practice.

PSIs generally interpret consecutively - the speech broken into chunks re-relayed during pauses left in between. Even with simple sentences broken into small chunks this requires an excellent active memory; longer tracts need note-taking skills and recall. All along, the brain hears in one language, remembers, processes, and reinvents in appropriate, exact vocabulary in the other. No time to ponder or flick at your dictionary, it must be immediate.

Raquel Mullen, who interprets between Portuguese and English, has enjoyed the learning experience of becoming a PSI, including developing her specialist vocabulary, but finds the most rewarding part is seeing "the level of comfort we provide and the gratitude for our help."

The work requires an awareness of professional ethics. An interpreter can be working in very personal, sensitive, challenging situations and must keep a cool head and maintain a professional impartiality. They need to be assertive and resilient. Raquel considers that having empathy and being non-judgemental are essential qualities for the job. "Interpreters can influence the conversation and outcome...being confidential, this can be difficult in small communities where [people of the language community] all know each other. The interpreter is part of the community and needs to be professional over and above social aspects."

Like Raquel, Eva Valle Sanches, an interpreter of Spanish, enjoys the variety and challenge, the opportunity to learn continuously and work in a range sectors and environments, with people. Both also cite flexibility as a big advantage of the work, which they can fit around the rest of their schedules. Plus the variety, which keeps things interesting.

For such a varied and challenging role, you would expect that the PSI community would be a happy, fulfilled lot. Sadly, there is a downside. PSIs are currently a fractured and somewhat disillusioned group. Developments with the way language

THE DARK ART OF CHUCHOTAGE (OR WHISPERED INTERPRETING)

Whispered or simultaneous interpreting is when a longer stream of information is relayed by the interpreter, softly, sitting close to the client while the speaker continues to speak. That's one ear listening and processing one language, and speaking in the other language, while still listening intently and continuously to the first.

There can no pause or hesitation, as there's no stopping to catch up. It's a hard earned skill, and needs the readiness to paraphrase and perform linguistic gymnastics to convey full meaning under pressure. It can be highly stressful - though, once you are good at it, especially rewarding.

Conference interpreters work like this all the time in booths, simultaneously interpreting in (ideally) half hour shifts, such is the exhaustive nature of concentrating at that level. PSIs use this sometimes, too, especially in court hearings.

services are contracted and provided have led to reduced pay rates, an exodus of qualified people from the profession and a sense that their value is being continually chipped away. In an industry that is difficult to staff and where skills and training needs are complex, regulation and qualifications have always posed difficulties. A number of groups are working to improve this, along with bodies like the NRPSI, the national regulatory body. But there has been a bit of a race to the bottom in terms of pay and quality assurance. Eva agrees that while she enjoys the work, she wouldn't necessarily recommend people to train now: "[training] is very expensive, time consuming and not particularly well paid. Some agencies pay the same hourly rate whether the interpreter is qualified or not. Depending on your language pair you may have enough work, or you may not."

It can only be hoped that interpreters will succeed in the next few years to return to a regulated industry, which gives the pay and professional recognition they deserve. In the meantime, kudos to those working hard at their own continuous development, at maintaining their skills and knowledge to continue to provide non-English speakers the support they need.

For, when that operation does come around, or that meeting or court case, and an interpreter walks into the scene to bridge the communication void - there is little but sheer gratitude on both sides. The client is no longer alone and has someone who understands their language and culture. The professionals are reassured of facts and nuance and are relayed sensitively, nothing missed or neglected. That this bridge has a human face and presence is of immeasurable value, technology can go so far but it may be enough to imagine the addition of a fuzzy telephone line, or 'google translate' roughly inserted into proceedings, not recognising regional accents or colloquialisms, for example. This can add to the stress and alienation on both sides. We have found many interactions this year being replaced or done remotely online - with varying degrees of success. PSIs largely agree this is one field where the more personal and human the interaction is, the better. One can only hope the human Public Service Interpreter will get to hang around.