INTRODUCTION

This handbook is intended for use to support a one-day workshop in medical terminology for interpreters or as a self study tool for interpreters. It can be used by any interpreters in healthcare but will be of most use to Spanish interpreters because many of the activity answer keys also include Spanish translations. However, due to the shortage of self study resources available for medical terminology, those who interpret for languages other than Spanish may find this handbook helpful.

Medical interpreters must have a strong command of medical terminology, as two national surveys of medical interpreters' work attest.\(^1\) Yet most medical interpreters in the field find that mastering the terminology is one of their greatest challenges. There are many reasons why interpreting medical terminology may be difficult. For example:

- The number of medical terms to master can seem overwhelming.
- Many medical terms are high register (a formal level of language).
- Different sectors in healthcare have specialized vocabulary.
- Many terms derive from Latin and Greek and can be unfamiliar to those without formal education in the health or allied health professions.
- Doctors are often unaware that the terms are difficult for patients: they do not realize that even when interpreters correctly interpret medical terms, the words may have no meaning for the patient.

Another challenge is that correctly converting an English term into another language may be inadequate if the interpreter has misunderstood what the term means in a medical context. In addition, for many languages there is a common problem of false cognates, where one word in English may sound similar to a word in another language when in fact the two words have different meanings, or share some meanings but not others.

Of course, no one can learn medical terminology overnight. Ideally, interpreters will further their education by taking courses in medical terminology at two- or four-year colleges, where many excellent programs are available for health and allied health professionals. Such programs may also benefit interpreters. Therefore, this handbook is intended only to launch interpreters on their journey toward mastering medical terms in two languages and is not a final destination.

This handbook is the basis for a one-day workshop, but it may also be helpful as continuing education for anyone who does not have access to in-depth medical terminology programs and who interprets in a healthcare setting. Such settings include hospitals, health departments, free clinics, school health rooms, domestic violence centers, crisis intervention and many other settings. Some freelance interpreters end up working in any or all these settings.

One goal of this workshop is to introduce medical interpreters to most of the basic vocabulary they should seek to master. Another goal is to help

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them to develop tools and strategies to expand their medical terminology in specialized healthcare settings where they may interpret most often. Whether those reading this handbook are using it in a workshop, as a self study tool or by working with a partner or “study buddy,” the following objectives apply.

Objective 1: Correctly use basic medical terms in two languages.

a) Use the meaning of Latin/Greek roots and affixes to interpret medical terminology.

b) Demonstrate knowledge of common terms for body parts, body systems and diseases.

Objective 2: Develop skills for overcoming challenges in medical terminology.

a) Discuss basic terms for tests, procedures and symptoms.

b) List and compare strategies and resources for learning new medical terminology.

We welcome feedback from medical interpreters and others for future editions of this handbook and the workshop it supports. Self-study flashcards to accompany this handbook are in development and may be available for sale in future. If you have other suggestions, please call or write to:

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We strongly encourage anyone who purchases this book for self study to find another medical interpreter and to partner with that individual to study this handbook and complete the terminology exercises together. Most interpreters benefit greatly from the interaction, and research suggests that their emotional connection helps to enhance memory retention. (In other words, not only is it more fun to study with a partner: it’s more effective!)

If you are studying with a partner, for several exercises each of you will need your own copy of the handbook. Copyright law permits photocopying a few pages of this handbook for self study, but it does not permit photocopying the whole handbook.