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25 September 2019

The World of a Medical Transcriptionist

“I remember walking into my first clinic. I was so nervous that my hand shook on the door handle,” said Avis Marshall when I asked her about how she started her career as a medical transcriptionist. While many people might know how it feels to be nervous on their first day at a job, most people have no idea what working as a medical transcriptionist involves. A medical transcriptionist transcribes in medical terms what a doctor or clinician is dictating after a patient visit, surgery, test results, etc. The medical language has a form all its own, complete with synonyms, antonyms and all the rules of the English language. It is the medical transcriptionist’s job to correctly and perfectly document this information while understanding mispronunciations and accents, and Avis Marshall has been a transcriptionist for 32 years. Marshall’s experience shows how much the work of a medical transcriptionist has changed over the years.

Before becoming a medical transcriptionist, Marshall had a civil service job that entailed talking to the public 8 hours a day. She talked to people of all cultures and economic levels. It was a high-stress, fast-paced job. She left this job to take on a medical transcription job closer to home. The job was at a clinic near a major city. The women in her office enjoyed chatting before they worked. They would interact with patients and doctors, all the while receiving a vast medical education absolutely free of charge. As technology improved, they became more and more efficient.

The medical world was also changing and improving, implementing new laws regarding medical privacy and responsibility. This brought about numerous changes to the profession. The changes for Marshall as a transcriptionist involved being responsible for correcting doctors’

mistakes, mishaps, diction, sentence structure, medications and measurements. In short, she and the other transcriptionists were responsible for producing absolutely correct documentation of what the doctor was dictating. If they could not find the correct information, they had to know where to find the correct references. They were transcribing legal documents, putting their names on them, and claiming responsibility.

Soon technology again improved, and the transcriptionists in Marshall's office were sent home with computers to make space in their office for more clinic space. A few things happened that the transcriptionists could not have predicted. No longer would they have human interaction. No longer did Marshall drive to or dress for work. She states that doctors assumed the transcriptionists no longer existed. They thought the computer was recognizing their speech, and in fact, some programs were doing that. No longer were the transcriptionists invited to office parties, dinners, meetings. They were silent, invisible, forgotten. Soon Marshall realized how much she needed her drive to work in the morning, or the stress-relief offered by the drive back home. She says that she felt ugly because she worked in pajamas. There was no need for makeup. Her work buddies were her pet birds. The only time anyone knew the transcriptionists existed was if a mistake was made.

According to Marshall, there are benefits to working in her field. For 32 years, she says she has been receiving a paycheck while receiving a medical education, something most people spend many years and so much money on, and now she can do it from home. However, one thing I learned by interviewing her is that there are better parts of the medical field to go into than medical transcription. Her description of how the transcriptionists became invisible and were not invited to parties or meetings after they started working from home was sad, and there are other parts of the medical field, like nursing, that are not able to be done from home. A job

that can be changed that easily by technology is not a job I want to have. Medical transcribing was a good job when Avis Marshall started, but no longer is today.