ABSTRACT

Four countries offer specialized interpreter certification programs that take into account the needs of the healthcare market: Australia, Canada, United Kingdom, and the United States. This chapter provides an overview, analysis, and comparison of these certification programs by which specialized medical interpreters can demonstrate minimum standards of performance. This chapter reviews several components of five certification schemes: 1) pre-requisites, 2) knowledge areas, 3) skills areas, 4) language combinations, and 5) certification maintenance. The comparisons reveal similar approaches to interpreter certification with a few significant variations. These common elements form the basis for a substantive international equivalence and comparability. At a closer look, each scheme reveals different solutions to the shared challenges. This chapter ends with recommendations for any ongoing or future interpreter certification program and for interpreting stakeholders.

INTRODUCTION

Certification for individual professionals, also called accreditation in some countries, is a process by which a certifying agency attests or certifies that an individual is minimally qualified to provide a particular service. Professional certification programs provide a more formal and fair assessment program, using an assessment development process, exam(s) production, administration, and passing grades that meet the validity and reliability requirements of psychometricians. Through a scientific process, the certifying body can be confident to ‘certify’ to the public that those who have successfully passed this rigorous process are qualified to perform the tasks required.
In any field, these candidates, after having their pre-requisites approved and passing one or more exam(s), become certified, and are usually listed in a professional registry, accessible to the public to verify such credentials. A training or educational certificate does not constitute certification (Adams, 2009).

Community interpreting, also referred to as public service interpreting, is an umbrella term initially used by conference interpreters to describe this new form of interpreting services outside the conference setting. This includes the specializations of medical/healthcare, legal/court/judiciary, immigration, elections, educational, religious, conflict zone, social services, and more. It is not a specialization per se, but a collection of many different manifestations of interpreting as listed above, that fall outside the conference-interpreting domain. There are many similarities between interpreters in these non-conference settings, when compared with conference interpreting. In the United States, the term community interpreting is not commonly used, as it does not distinguish features between legal, educational, or medical interpreting. There are various unique factors to medical interpreting being highlighted in this publication. This chapter will focus on medical/healthcare interpreter certifications, and will utilize the original term used to define this specialization: medical interpreter and medical interpreting.

BACKGROUND

Terminology Matters

As with any subject, terminology matters. Terminology is simply a common language, nomenclature, classification, or taxonomy designed to be shared among users to ensure that we all understand the concepts as intended by the originator of the message. In the certification and assessment fields, specific terminology is utilized and often confused by laypersons. This is why the author decided to provide a list of the most common terms and definitions related to ‘certification’ at the end of the chapter, in order to aid the reader in understanding the text. It may be useful for professional groups that are thinking of establishing their own certification programs. Alternate terms are given in italics. Note that the term ‘testing’ or ‘tests’ will not be used in this chapter. The purpose of most tests is to assign grades to students. They offer limited diagnostic information to identify areas for improvement. The term assessment is a more comprehensive concept. An assessment may be a test or an exam that is intended to measure a test taker’s knowledge, skills, aptitude, or physical ability. While laypersons use the term test and exam interchangeably, ‘exam’ usually refers to a mid-term or a final exam, whereas ‘test’ can be given at any point in time to measure knowledge of a learning module, for example. For this reason, the term ‘exam’ will be used in this chapter (International Encyclopedia of the Social Sciences, 2008).

Professional Advancement and Recognition

Professionalization is the social process by which any trade or occupation transforms itself into a publicly recognized profession. The professions that benefit from the highest recognition are the ones that have gone through all the stages of professionalization and are protected legally through licensure, so that only those that are qualified are allowed to perform. This occurs primarily in activities that, when performed by unqualified individuals, may put the public at risk. This is typically called an occupational closure, closing the profession to entry from outsiders, amateurs, and the unqualified (Waddington, 1990).
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