
Medical Transcription - A Fundamental Industry Overview-

Medical transcriptionists transcribe reports dictated by physicians to create permanent health records.

These records are used to document patient care, to provide background information for future care, and to provide a record for billing purposes. The transcribed records are legal and medical documents and must be completely accurate.

There are numerous kinds of reports, however, the most frequently encountered include:

History and Physical Examination

This report is typically created the first time a physician sees the patient. It includes information about the patient's past health problems, family's health problems, social history, current health concerns, and the findings of the physician's physical examination of the patient.

Consultations

These are typically business letters written by physicians to share patient information with other physicians and with insurance companies.

Operative Reports

This is a detailed report of a surgical procedure, or operation.

Discharge Summary

This is dictated when a patient leaves the hospital, and includes a summary of the patient's tests and treatments, discharge medications, and plans for future care. The preceding four reports are called the Basic 4, and are the primary reports transcribed. In addition, medical transcriptionists frequently transcribe the following reports:

- Emergency department report
- Radiology report
- Pathology report

Most Independent Medical Transcriptionists who work from home use digital equipment and processes. A digital transcriber consists of a foot control or hot-keys, usually the F keys, and a headset that is controlled by a software program.

The foot control has two pedals on it. When you step on one pedal, the dictation plays through your headset, and you begin typing. When you lift your foot off the pedal, the dictation stops and automatically backs up slightly - as if you'd briefly pushed the rewind button on a tape player. It works this way so that when you step on the pedal again, you get a few words to orient you. This allows you to transcribe with a smooth, fast rhythm. Hot-keys can be set to rewind slightly also, so you can hear the last few words again.

The second pedal can be configured to fast forward and fast reverse.

Dictation files are sent to and from the transcription service by a variety of methods, including direct file transfer between computers, uploading and downloading via the Internet, and transfer via telephone. This last process is no longer very popular, because of long distance charges.

A digital transcriber records, saves, opens, and plays files created in sound formats, such as .wav files or mp3 files. Quality digital transcribers have an option to compress these files for quicker transfer. Although many medical transcriptionists are intimidated by the idea of using digital, and most training courses are still based on the use of cassette tapes, there is nothing the least complicated about digital. Most of the large services have already switched to digital and soon all services will be using it, as it is the most cost-effective and convenient method of file transfer. Some services are already telling applicants, "If you don't know digital, don't apply here." Training courses that don't teach digital are simply not preparing students for today's work environment.

As you can see, it is vitally important for students to be trained in the use of professional tools and techniques. Unfortunately, most training programs completely ignore this need, and concentrate wholly on teaching terminology. The result is frustration for both the students, who have trouble getting a job, and medical transcription services, who can't find competent MTs to service their accounts.

Getting Hired As A New Medical Transcriptionist...

You may have heard that it's impossible to get a job as a medical transcriptionist unless you have experience.

Usually, the person telling you this is an experienced medical transcriptionist who never quite explains how she and tens of thousands of other medical transcriptionists managed to get their first jobs.

The fact is that medical transcription services have to hire new Medical Transcriptionists, whether they want to or not. The demand for medical transcription is growing at such a rate that there are not enough experienced Medical Transcriptionists to service the accounts, and this situation is going to intensify over the next few decades as baby-boomers age and demand increasing health care services.

Transcription services that refuse to hire new Medical Transcriptionists are faced with two choices: they can turn down accounts, or they can pay a premium in both compensation and benefits in an effort to attract experienced Medical Transcriptionists from their current employers.

So what does it take to get your foot in the door?

High accuracy and productivity, and familiarity with professional tools.

In other words, there is no secret. There is a simple fact: if you have been tested to transcribe the Basic 4 at 250 lines per hour with 98% accuracy, and you know and use digital equipment, you'll have no trouble finding a transcription service that will give you a chance to prove yourself.

Don't be misled by claims of various training vendors. Few transcription services could care less where you got your training. They only want to know that you can produce at professional levels, because they get paid on productivity, just like the Medical Transcriptionists they hire.

So why do so many help-wanted ads ask for experienced only? Because many people who apply for medical transcription jobs have not been adequately trained. Even courses that provide sufficient training in terminology usually ignore training in professional tools and techniques. As one employer recently said, "Oh sure, they

can recite the ten major body systems. Unfortunately, they can't transcribe more than 100 lines per hour."

A "line" consists of 65 keystrokes, including characters and spaces, but not including formatting keystrokes, such as Tab or Return.

To give you an idea of what that translates to in typing speed, a person who can type 54 words per minute would, in theory, produce 300 lines per hour. However, for a medical transcriptionist to produce 300 lines per hour, she must know her terminology and use professional tools, because medical typing is more complicated than business or personal typing. And 54 words per minute is just barely adequate typing speed for a medical transcriptionist.

Don't walk - RUN - from any training vendor who tells you 35 words per minute is adequate. **This is absolutely untrue!** You will have trouble getting a job if you can't type a **minimum** of 60 words per minute, and employers routinely expect 70+ words per minute. However, accuracy is even more important than how fast you type. How fast you type can determine your average pay, however low accuracy can cost you the job position. Most companies would like to see a 98% accuracy in your transcription work.

As a professional medical transcriptionist, the keyboard is one of your primary tools, and professionals are expected to demonstrate expertise with their tools.

Students who don't have adequate typing speed and accuracy can gain the skills they need with inexpensive software programs designed to teach typing skills. There are many excellent programs available for \$25 or less that can be used to increase typing skills while the student is studying medical transcription. No student should allow slow typing speed to derail their career. Anyone who is not suffering a physical disability can learn to type 70+ words per minute. It hasn't been that long since secretaries were expected to type at least 72 words per minute on manual typewriters! Even if you start off at 30 wpm like I did, you will very quickly improve your speed due to the transcription practice and all the short cuts you will learn. This should not be an issue of worry.

In summary, the only secret to breaking into medical transcription is competency. If you hear someone say they took medical transcription training but no one was willing to hire them without experience, ask them to explain to you what a hematocrit is and tell you its normal values, ask them how fast they transcribe the Basic 4 and at what accuracy level, ask them if they own a digital transcriber. Somewhere among the answers, you'll get a blank stare or a response that will clarify the real reason they can't get a job.

As a professional medical transcriptionist, you must know your terminology, know and use professional tools, and possess adequate keyboarding skills. Why should any transcription service, or student, expect less?

The Business of Medical Transcription

As a new medical transcriptionist, you'll need to make career decisions right from the start. One of the first choices you'll make is whether to work at home or on-site.

Working on site affords you the opportunity to have help readily available. But telecommuters and ICs (independent contractors) usually earn more money.

Over half of all medical transcriptionists work from home. As an IC, you can work for companies located anywhere in the U.S. This is important because there is a wide difference in pay depending upon where the service is located. The Pacific Northwest area pays the highest rates, typically 8 to 12 cents per line, with more for high production as a subcontractor. The chart below will give you an idea of typical compensation per line for **employee/ICs, and for those who contract directly with physicians or clinics.**

A line consists of 65 keystrokes, including spaces and punctuation, but not including formatting keystrokes, such as tab or hard return. When converting lines to words-per-minute to estimate typing speed, the line consists of 11 words. So a person who could type 50 words-per-minute, could produce 273 lines per hour, and that is without using easy short-cuts, merge files, word abbreviation software and macros - assuming that they know their terminology and don't have to stop to use reference books. Using the mentioned short-cuts, which you will learn with this course, your production will increase by at least 30% anyway.

Compensation By Region		
Region	Employee - IC	Contracting Directly
Northwest	8 - 12	17 - 22
West	6 - 11	12 - 20
Midwest	6 - 10	14 - 20

East	8 - 10	12 - 18
South	8 - 12	13 - 19

How much you can earn is also dependent in part on the kind of transcription you do. Hospital transcription usually takes longer than clinical transcription, so your productivity is lower. Clinical transcription is simpler, and therefore faster. In addition, clinical transcription doesn't require the fast turnaround hospitals demand, so there is more flexibility in scheduling. The fastest transcription of all is working in a specialty transcribing for the same physicians, for example, an OB-GYN practice. I highly recommend only working with specialties if you can, no matter what kind of specialty they are. The work is repetitive and soon becomes second nature.

In clinical transcription, you will focus mostly on histories and physical examinations, patient chart notes, and referral/consultation letters.

Specializing can increase your income dramatically, because you can build comprehensive glossaries for your Productivity Module, and you will become familiar with all the terms, tests, treatments, surgical equipment and techniques, etc., much more quickly.

After gaining some experience, you'll probably want to sign your own clients. It's easier to sign local clients, but even if you are in a lower paying area, you will probably earn more with your own clients than working for a transcription service in the Northwest.

Warning: Do NOT go after a general hospital client if you have no experience in hospital transcription. Get a year of hospital experience first. However, if you have specialized in a field such as radiology, cardiology, gastroenterology, etc., you can accept work from those departments without prior hospital experience. This is a good way to gain hospital experience in fact.

Typical rates to charge your own clients range from 15 to 24 cents per line. You'll need to find out what clients are paying in your area, of course. And it is by no means impossible to sign clients located in other regions.

Is it reasonable to start your own transcription business right out of training? Absolutely. Not only is it possible, but in many cases, it's the best choice.

You need to understand, right from the start, that your situation is different from that of most medical transcriptionists. You will come out of training at a level of productivity that most MTs enjoy only after years of experience.

By signing your own clients, you will not only earn more money right from the start, you can begin slow and build up confidence along with experience. If you start with one doctor, there will be no significant pressure for turnaround. You can see for yourself what you can do, and add doctors as you desire. But in the meantime, because you can charge higher rates, your income won't suffer. In many ways, it's the best of all possible choices for a new MT who has solid training and lots of experience transcribing authentic physician dictation.

Because you already own and use digital equipment, you don't have to invest in expensive equipment and call-in lines for your transcription service. Physicians simply dictate into their hand-held machine and save the file to the computer. Either the physician, or their office manager, transfers the file to you via the Internet. You transcribe the report and send it back to them via the Internet as an MS Word document file. They open the file and print.

If you want to consider signing your own clients, an excellent resource and reference book is *The Independent Medical Transcriptionist* by Donna Avila-Weil, CMT and Mary Glaccum, CMT. This book will help you with marketing materials and contracts, and covers a wide scope of questions and issues, although they take the traditional road regarding training. (Scorning productivity training while over-emphasizing terminology.)

If you choose to work for a transcription service, you will want to emphasize your high lines per hour and accuracy when you contact employers. Be sure to tell them that you've had extensive experience transcribing all major medical reports in a variety of specialties, including ESL (English Second Language, or foreign) doctors. Tell them that you are familiar with and own digital equipment.

When a service is interested in considering you for hire, they will want to test you. Don't worry, you'll be able to do well on their test - it's the same kind of dictation you've been practicing with throughout your training. A few transcription services make it a practice of giving very difficult dictation to a potential new hire. If that happens to you, don't let it spook you. Do the best you can, secure in the knowledge that they know it's tough dictation and don't expect perfection. Furthermore, there is some tough dictation included in your practice material, so it won't be the first time you've been faced with poor sound quality and fast dictators. Just relax, and do the best job you can.

Below are links to some transcription services known to hire new MTs. It isn't necessary to apply to such a service, but it's a good place to start. One caveat: some new MTs who haven't a clue enter their availability on job board areas meant for employers. And some unscrupulous people advertise jobs when, in fact, they are employment services who want to charge you for finding you a job. The latter are totally unnecessary for MTs. The former are hopeless. If you end up contacting either of these two groups, just shrug and realize it's part of the medical transcription world.

Few companies advertise that they will hire new MTs, yet most will, if they need someone and you have high productivity and accuracy levels. Don't hesitate to apply to any company that advertises 2 years or less of experience.

After one year of experience, you'll be in great demand, so you may want to accept a lower-paying job to get that first year. Or you may decide that there is no point to all this, and simply sign clients directly.

Most importantly, don't let the experiences of others define your concept of what you can do, especially if you visit medical transcription boards, you'll read that this or that school or training is terrible and a rip-off. Or that no companies hire new MTs. Or that someone spent a fortune for training and still hasn't found a job after 4 years (!). Or that an MT needs 5 or more years of experience before trying to sign clients directly.

Take all this with a grain of salt. I got my own clients within three months after finishing training!

It is unnecessary to spend a fortune for medical transcription training, because most companies couldn't care less where you got your training. They only want to know that you have high productivity and accuracy.

Although few companies advertise that they will hire new MTs, many do IF you have the necessary skills. The reason these whiners can't get a job is because they can't transcribe quickly and accurately. Regardless of what anyone says, there is no secret, no mystery to getting a job as a new MT. If you can transcribe 200 lines per hour or more, with 98% accuracy, and know how to present yourself as a professional, you should have no trouble finding a job.

On the other hand, if you transcribe 100 lines per hour with 85% accuracy, fill your cover letter or resume with personal comments, have an email address that is something like "fungirl@hotmail.com" and an answering machine message recorded by your two-year-old, you can forget it. No one will hire you, regardless of how many companies you apply to. Medical transcription is a profession that impacts the lives of patients, the careers of physicians, and the legal responsibilities of hospitals, medical practices, and transcription services. You have to be sharp, competent, and professional.

Some jobs that advertise they want only local applicants will be willing to consider non-local people if you can provide a solution to the work transfer problem. If they specialize in clinical work, for example, which doesn't require the fast turnaround that hospitals require, you may offer to have an overnight service pick up tapes, and send transcription back via encrypted email. Be creative, provide solutions, and emphasize your high level of professional skills.

Good luck!!! ~ You Can Do It!!
