

The Cultural Connector



A publication of the
OFFICE OF COMMUNITY PROGRAMS "Connecting
the University to the Community"

Paving the Way to Health Care Access: **A Day of Learning for Interpreters and the Health Care Team: Exploring Alternative Medicine**

VOLUME 3, ISSUE 1

OCTOBER 2007



Sarah Jones



Darshak Sanghavi, MD

Inside this

Paving the Way to	1
MIT Graduates	2
Nataly Kelly reflects upon building bridges between cultures	3
Babel: A film by Alejandro González Iñárritu	3
Farewell to an MIT Program Coordinator	5

The second Paving the Way to Health Care Access Conference took place on Friday May 18, 2007 at The Beechwood Hotel in Worcester. The event was sponsored by the Office of Community Programs, a Division of Commonwealth Medicine and the University of Massachusetts Medical School; MassHealth; Pacific Interpreters; Central Mass Area Health Education Center; and The WK Kellogg Foundation. One-hundred and fifty participants, including medical interpreters, health care staff, doctors, administrators, and students attended the event. The title of the conference was *A Day of Learning for Interpreters and the Health Care Team: Exploring Alternative Medicine*. The day's events examined medical alternatives in relation to cultural competency.

Following a welcome address by Mick Huppert, Director and Associate Dean of the Office of Community Programs at UMass Medical School Izabel S. Arocha, President of the International Medical Interpreters Association, re-

flected upon The State of Medical Interpretation in Today's World. Darshak Sanghavi, MD, Assistant Professor and Pediatric Cardiologist at UMass Medical School and the Author of *A Map of the Child: A Pediatrician's Tour of the Body* presented his perspective on how common alternative medical beliefs can effect the care giver's treatment of patients. The afternoon ended with a presentation by Sarah Jones, a Tony Award® Winning Playwright, Actor, and Poet. Ms. Jones performed *A Right to Care*, a one-woman show (consisting of a multicultural cast of characters), which tackles themes of inequality in healthcare.

Afternoon workshop presentations included: *Turning Poison into Medicine: Self-Care Strategies for Daily Life* presented by Zayda Vallejo, a Meditation and Mindfulness Instructor; *Acupuncture & Chinese Herbal Medicine* presented by Maura Twomey, an Acupuncturist; and *Path of Light: Shamanic Healing* presented by Dr. Michael R. Verrilli an Osteopathic physician.

MIT Graduates of 2006 and 2007



Merrimack Valley AHEC
Spring 2007: 54 Hour Medical Interpreter
Training Program graduates.



Southeastern Mass AHEC
Fall 2006: 54 Hour Medical Interpreter
Training Program graduates.



Central Mass AHEC
Fall 2006: 54 Hour Medical Interpreter
Training Program graduates.



Southeastern Mass AHEC
Spring 2007: 54 Hour Medical Interpreter
Training Program graduates.

The “Right” Answer

By Nataly Kelly

As medical interpreters, we often serve as bridges, not just between languages, but between cultures. One experience in particular demonstrated this to me in a way that I will never forget.

I was interpreting during a speech therapy session. The patient was an elderly Spanish-speaking female stroke victim, most likely in her late 70’s or 80’s. Like many stroke victims, she had to concentrate and make a tremendous effort to pronounce each word. Her speech was slow, and many letters were difficult for her to say, but she was obviously committed to doing the very best she could. In spite of the obvious strain, her voice projected a sense of pride in what she was able to accomplish. Her determined attitude was inspirational.

One speech exercise required the patient to answer basic questions about different job functions in society. For example, the therapist would ask, “Who drives the bus?” The patient knowingly replied, “The bus driver.” When asked, “Who brings you the food in a restaurant?” The patient proudly responded with the correct answer, “The waiter.” Each time, the therapist would respond with encouraging words, and the patient seemed increasingly confident in her abilities to produce the right answers, albeit with slow and painstaking attention to each syllable.

However, the patient’s steady pattern of providing the correct answers came to a halt when she was asked, “Who do you borrow a cup of sugar from?” Those of us familiar with mainstream US culture know that the answer the therapist expected to hear was, “the neighbor”, but this concept was a source of utter confusion for the patient. Instead of answering the question with the typical one-word

answer, she patiently put together a question of her own. With long pauses between each word, she asked, “Why--would--I--want--to--borrow--a--cup--of--sugar...?” There was surprise and a hint of frustration in her voice. Her steady string of correct answers had suddenly come to a halt.

After interpreting the patient’s response, I explained to the provider that, in many cultures, the typical diet might not include recipes that call for a cup of sugar, and that this unit of measure may not be customary either. I also explained that the standard definition of “neighbor” in many cultures might not be likely to include the borrowing of grocery staples.

The therapist said, “Fine, we’ll just skip that question and move on.” After I interpreted this explanation to the patient, the exercise continued as before. Only now, even though she was able to provide the right answers to all of the questions being asked, it seemed to me that she was frustrated or nervous. The excitement and confidence she had experienced by being a “good student” had suddenly diminished. With each question asked by the therapist, I silently hoped for concepts that would be culturally relevant, for the patient’s sake.

We asked several questions to which the patient provided the expected answers. Then, the therapist asked, “Who grows the food?” The correct answer, according to U.S. culture, would be, “the farmer”. I interpreted this sentence slowly and clearly, taking special care to choose the verb equivalent for “grow” that would be

most closely associated with crops and farming, to eliminate confusion. The patient seemed confident that she knew the right answer to this question. Without skipping a beat, she said, in a somewhat louder voice, “The mother.”

I interpreted her answer into English, prepared to follow the interpretation by explaining to the provider that, in some places, large-scale farming might be less common, and that it might be more common for families to plant their own supply of food in a garden, usually tended to by the mother of the household. I wanted the provider to know that the patient’s answer was correct, at least, within a different cultural framework.

But before I even had a chance to finish the explanation, the therapist interrupted and rephrased the question, “Who grows the food for a *lot* of people?” I felt a sense of apprehension, mixed with hope that perhaps these additional words might help the patient come up with the “right” answer to this question.

She seemed to think that this was an easy question. More confidently than ever, the patient immediately answered, “God.” Just as swiftly, I rendered her answer in English.

All three of us just sat there in silence for a few moments, although it seemed like an eternity. The provider seemed to be processing this response, and the patient just stayed silent, waiting for her next question. With no words to interpret from either party, I too stayed quiet.

Finally, the provider thanked the pa-

(Continued on page 4)

Babel: A Film Directed by Alejandro González Iñárritu

Having viewed Babel several months ago during its initial release. I felt compelled to view it again on DVD before writing this article. I was surprised at just how well I'd retained nearly every scene in the film over time. For those not familiar with the subject matter or plot, Babel examines how a single event in a specific place results in dramatic consequences, which affect the lives of four families living on four different continents. What makes the film unique is the fact that the personal consequences of this single event eventually leads to international conflict. The title, Babel, reflects the film's over all theme of failed communication.

The film acknowledges the fact that communication far exceeds verbal language. It looks at issues of communication in relation to isolation, intimidation, and emotion. The film involves the accidental, if not entirely innocent shooting of an American tourist by two young brothers living in a small village in Morocco. The victim of the shooting is the wife of a California businessman. The couple is on vacation in Morocco, attempting to recover from the loss of their youngest child. Their Mexican born housekeeper is charged with taking care of their two remaining children in their absence. A Japanese businessman and his teenage daughter are also woven into the mix of people directly tied by a single event.

The film examines several reasons for breakdowns in communication. While verbal language barriers exist, other less obvious reasons include: emotions, isolation,

intimidation, sex, death, and politics.

If you are involved in everyday communications issues on a professional level, I highly recommend that you see this film.

Babel earned several Academy Award nominations, including two Best Supporting Actress nods and Best Picture.

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(Continued on page 5)

The "Right" Answer

(Continued from page 3)

tient, told her she had done a good job in the session, and told her she looked forward to seeing her the following week.

I will never know how this experience might have impacted the therapist, or what she was thinking during those drawn-out moments of silence. It may be that she continued to use the same questions with every patient, without regard for cultural differences. Or, it may be that she began a campaign to develop more culturally relevant materials for speech therapists everywhere. I will never know.

But I do believe I know how it impacted the patient. She walked out of the office that day with a firm belief that she was making progress, and that she had ended the session by conquering the final question with what she believe to be the only logical and appropriate answer.

And according to her view of the world, it most definitely was.

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Nataly Kelly is currently collecting anecdotes and stories from interpreters for publication in the book, "From Our Lips to Your Ears: How Interpreters Are Changing the World." If you would like to contribute, please visit the project website, www.fromourlips.com, and the project blog, <http://fromourlips.blogspot.net>

Best Wishes to Our Friend and Colleague



Myrza Rodriguez-Fearnley

Myrza Rodriguez-Fearnley has served as the Medical Interpreter Program Coordinator for the Southeastern Mass AHEC Office for the past two years. Prior to that assignment she held the same position with the Boston AHEC Office. Myrza left the position with Southeastern AHEC in mid June. We wish her well.

Review of Babel

(Continued from page 4)

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Medical Interpreter Training

Office of Community Programs
222 Maple Avenue, Chang Building
Shrewsbury, MA 01545

Phone: 508-856-3255 Fax: 508-856-4850

Visit our website at: www.ocp-map.org/Programs/mit/index.html

The Office of Community Programs is a program of Commonwealth Medicine.

Cultural Connector: Edited by Janet Culpepper, MIT Program Coordinator, OCP

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OFFICE OF COMMUNITY PROGRAMS



Our Mission

To improve the health and well-being of New England populations with limited access to health care. This is achieved by anticipating and responding to public health concerns and community needs through the development of innovative educational resources, health care services, partnership programs and technologies.