

The Chaos of Change: Some Thoughts on Our Industry, 2010

by Sidney K. Moormeister, Ph.D.

This article deals with the identification of challenges faced by medical transcriptionists in the Twenty-First Century. The first part features an overview of the climate in which today's MT must work; part two examines specific strategies and pathways for surviving—and thriving—in today's climate.

Le tremblement de terre. As I speak that expression aloud, which literally means “trembling of the earth,” I am transported to that fateful day, October 17, 1989, when at 5:04 p.m. my apartment in a large high-rise in San Francisco began to shake and tremble. Sitting on the floor waiting for the World Series to be broadcast, I felt as if I were on the back of a bucking bronco. I will never forget that day and my fervent prayer that I would die instantly rather than be buried beneath the cement rubble if our high-rise collapsed. Thankfully, the building did not collapse, but the absolute to-the-bone fear of that day has never truly left me; it lurks somewhere in the background of my mind. Lately it has been triggered by a different sort of earthquake; this time a “trembling of the earth” of the most basic of our foundations—that of financial security.

On a global level, we are facing the greatest challenge we have faced in my lifetime. Unemployment is at a 26-year high. Some people, even economists, have even dared to use the word “depression.” On a professional level, I see a similar trembling within the medical transcription profession. That state of our industry is in flux; some would go so far as to invoke the word “chaos.” So many diverse factors play a role in the uncertainty that every MT faces. The reality and the profundity of the changes that are coming (some are already here) cannot be ignored.

When a much-beloved medical transcription company (MDI) recently announced that it was merging with a much larger transcription company (Transcend), those weighing in with concerns and opinions about their future became more vocal. Other MTSOs also chimed in with additional concerns. It seems that the changes that are taking place are across the board and affect every company, from the largest corporate entity to the few mom and pops that have managed to survive.

To be an MT today is indeed to live in a state of chaos. I am often reminded of an amusement park ride of my child-

hood. Patterned after a house of horrors, this attraction featured skeletons, ghosts, werewolves, and vampires that popped up randomly in front of the little tin car that carried us down the track which ran through the middle of the house. In adulthood, I often recall that long-ago ride with its plethora of scary creatures that lunged out at us. For us children, being frightened was at least half the fun. In adulthood, the scary goblins of the haunted house can serve as a leitmotif for today's professional uncertainties; sadly, confronting them is surely not “fun,” but one of the biggest challenges contemporary MTs have ever faced. Those of us in the profession must make decisions regarding our future.

Although I frequently hear both seasoned MTs and newbies speak of plotting their exit strategies, I am not convinced that leaving is the best answer. Perhaps we need to focus more on problem identification and adaptation. We can reclaim our profession if we can inventory and utilize our skills. We must adapt to change. We must recognize how our profession has evolved. What are some of the factors that influence today's transcription climate?

- We now have a global economy which affects everything from the quality of the coat I buy to the accounts that I service for the MT company I work for. This is not your mother's (or even your big sister's) MT world. In many ways, it is a brave new frontier. For those who are not faint of heart, there are still opportunities to be had. For those who have slipped into a cavalier attitude and regard medical transcribing as a bedrock of security that will always be there and remain unchanged, there will be (and have been) rude awakenings. Medical transcription is not such a “sure thing” anymore.

- The day of the small mom and pop transcription company is long gone, likely never to return. When I began my career in medical transcription, I did so unwittingly, almost by accident. At the time, I looked at it as my ticket to finance my graduate education. I could study and attend classes during the day and work the night shift for a large metropolitan teaching hospital, thereby keeping my student loans at a manageable level. Armed with a scientific background (pre-med major) and excellent keyboarding skills, I was putty in the

Today's aspiring MTs will never know the camaraderie of the old-time transcription department where MTs worked together as a team.

hands of my mentor, the transcription department supervisor, who molded me into the kind of transcriptionist she wanted on her staff. She had the time and the interest to respond to my motivation and willingness to work hard. It was the quintessential quid pro quo situation that worked ideally for both of us. Sadly, there are few, if any, such mentors left. (Thank you, Avelina, wherever you may be.)

Today's aspiring MTs will never know the camaraderie of the old-time transcription department where MTs worked together as a team. There was something about working in a hospital that was more humane than being a "home-aloner," even if working at home affords one the much-maligned privilege of working in one's "jammies." The whole face of medical transcription has changed. Today's MT likely works alone in an atmosphere isolated from other MTs for a boss who will probably never be seen. Communication is likely to come through e-mails and instant messages. (Or in the case of a true emergency, pleas texted to one's BlackBerry imploring extra work!) The MT must be self-reliant in terms of time management and research skills.

Anxiety runs high these days among even the most skilled and experienced MTs. Those young enough to have many working years remaining are actively exploring options outside the field of medical transcription. Those of us contemplating retirement are trying to adapt to an ever-changing workplace.

Yet amidst all of the chaos and uncertainty, there is hope and, for my part, a genuine love of the profession. I hope that people will not be so quick to abandon a profession which, in my view, is still in its adolescence. I am convinced that we can survive and thrive in today's economy and in today's topsy-turvy transcription world. The key is to *accept the need for change*. Change is not an enemy but rather a catalyst that will move us to the next level in our profession.

Medical transcription as we know it today bears little resemblance to the profession I entered in 1969. Those were the days of true mentors, of carbon paper (does today's MT even know what carbon paper is?), and of seeing and smiling at the hospital's medical staff as you passed in the corridor after morning rounds. Even if Dr. Jones was a mushmouth, chances are he was a nice mushmouth who offered a smile or at least a nod. In short, he was a human being, not a disembodied voice filtering through sometimes subpar equipment. Now we are physically removed—sometimes by several states—from those whom we serve. Do we lose a bit of our humanity by working remotely? I say an unequivocal yes. And physicians do not even begin to understand the transcription process. When a colleague of mine asked her own physician

if he knew how the transcription for his clinic was handled, he replied, "It's magic."

There are other challenges that were unheard of "back in the day." Those wanting to enter our world would do well to consider these issues:

1. Working remotely can be isolating, not only in terms of missing the stimulation of interaction with peers, but also from the point of view of not being part of a team. One solution to this is to visualize not just the on-screen product but to constantly remind oneself that there is a *real patient* who is the reason for the medical record. Medical transcription is a service business and even though we may be serving the patient from the coast opposite his location, we are nonetheless providing the service and doing so in a professional and caring manner.

As a solution to the feeling that my job existed only in a kind of virtual reality, I joined a Yahoo group and round robin e-mail which enabled me to share some tips of my own and to get some of my own questions answered. I became phone friends with some of the MTs from the group and we found that we shared much in common. Most important of all, I was able to free myself of the strange notion that I was working alone somewhere in the middle of the desert.

2. Today's MT is facing more and more ESLs (dictators who speak English as a second language). Many would-be MTs are allowing the growing number of non-native speakers of English to intimidate them. In the last decade, the dictators I have transcribed have gone from approximately 10% to 90% ESL. Apprehensive when first assigned to a high-ESL account of a large mid-Atlantic teaching hospital chain, I found that the dictation had familiar rhythms, cadences, and phrases. After three months, there was no difference in my production whether doing ESLs or native speakers. (Indeed, I came to appreciate the irony of the fact that I much preferred my ESL clients to a certain native English-speaking cardiologist who had developed a fondness for eating celery and carrots while dictating.)

3. Without a doubt the factor that has the most impact on MTs is that of speech recognition (SR). Like escargot, mince pie, and Werner Herzog movies, SR is a taste to be acquired. Or not. It is either loved or hated. I have met very few MTs who are on the fence about the new technology. Twenty years ago, the MT community was fearful that the emerging SR programs would "take away our jobs." That has proved not to be the case; rather, SR has radically changed the way that some of us work.

I have met MTs who love SR, who are grateful to it for providing a way for them to work in spite of carpal tunnel and general keyboard fatigue. Some simply love it for its technology. (True techies at heart, these are undoubtedly the folks who purchase BlackBerrys and iPhones and load them with every conceivable application, not because they need them, but for the sheer fun of figuring it all out.)

MTs in the other camp find the prospect of SR to be so daunting that they refuse even to try to learn it. My own

approach is somewhat different; I like technology and have enough geeky toys throughout my apartment to establish my tech cred, but I have opted out of SR. My reasoning is that I can consistently transcribe 300-350 lines per hour; my focus and approach are in speed and accuracy. My belief is that it is much faster for me to transcribe it from scratch than to correct it on SR. After decades of developing my transcription technique and style, I do not want to slow down to the pace required for SR. This is simply a personal preference; others may hold the opposite view.

4. Global change is the macrocosm. Few if any of us in the MT community can do anything about the economic crisis other than keeping ourselves employed and out of the clutches of bankruptcy. I am happy to leave the challenges of global finance to the likes of Ben Bernanke and his minions. My attention will go instead to the microcosm—the world of the MT. Companies are born, companies merge, companies fold. The beat goes on and all that remains constant is change. We are faced with a choice: Do we embrace change and work with what we are given, do what needs to be done for our clients and work at achieving the flexibility needed to survive? It is possible to do just that, even in this economy, even with the professional challenges we face.

To those of us who are hardy souls who are determined to remain and flourish as MTs, I humbly offer a few small tidbits of insight gleaned from four decades in the MT world as we explore the second item for consideration—how we respond to the global changes and shifts in our profession. I present for your consideration a grab-bag of ideas; hopefully one or more of them will be useful.

1. It's only change, don't be afraid of it. Change has always been with us. (You should have seen the hubbub that surrounded the arrival of the first self-correcting IBM typewriters at our hospital in the 1970s!)

2. Be honest in your assessment of your skills. Keep your resumé updated in case of a merger.

3. Act, don't react, to new opportunities involving speech recognition technology. If possible, negotiate a trial period in which you can work with the technology to see if it is a fit for you. Ask for an escape clause to allow you to return to straight transcribing, should you not want to do SR. That said, give it an honest chance and an open-minded approach. There are many MTs who went kicking and screaming into the world of SR who genuinely love it and in retrospect wonder what their fear was all about.

4. Bid the past goodbye. Whether offshoring is right or wrong is essentially a political question that each person must answer for oneself, then take action that is consistent with his or her own personal values. When a much-beloved company that had been a part-time client of mine for years announced

. . . we can survive and thrive in today's economy and in today's topsy-turvy transcription world. The key is to accept the need for change. Change is not an enemy but rather a catalyst that will move us to the next level in our profession.

that it was merging with a much larger company that offshores, I politely but immediately served my notice, explaining that as a matter of personal principle, I do not accept clients who engage in offshoring. (I hold an "American jobs for American workers" kind of mindset.) I thanked the company for having employed me and genuinely wished them well. I had colleagues who opted to stay on and I wished them well, too. Civility is rapidly becoming a casualty of our technological age. I long ago vowed to be mindful to be kind to everyone. Kindness costs nothing and yields countless rewards.

5. Do some self-assessment. Ask yourself questions. Why are you an MT? Where do you want to be in one year? Five years from now? Is your current position allowing you to move in that direction? If not, why are you still there?

6. Ask yourself what you want from medical transcription. A decent salary and a way to make the mortgage payment, obviously. But I have always felt that there has to be something that remains after the money is gone. What is it about medical transcription that you genuinely like? What excites you? The new technology? Exposure to the world of medicine? Perhaps you, like the late, much admired Vera Pyle, chose transcription because you have a genuine love of words. Can that love of words be parlayed into other avenues of medical transcription? Is your grammar flawless? Would QA provide a different sort of challenge or a welcome change for you?

One of the true benefits of medical transcription has been the opportunity to meet many wonderful, intelligent, unique people. I would like to close this article, which has dealt mostly with data and questions, by introducing you to one of the most impressive MTs I have ever met, a woman by the name of Lita Lenhart. A resident of Northern California, Lita has had a steady passion for medical transcription since 1973. She explored other careers before settling on medical transcription. (As an interesting aside, Lita is, like many MTs, a voracious reader, admitting to reading even the telephone book if there is nothing else available!)

As a seasoned MT, she has seen it all and has been a witness to the ongoing transformation of our profession. Like many other practicing MTs, she laments the element of greed that has been injected into our profession. She acknowledges

We need to run our businesses like the businesses they are—even if we are a business of one and we operate not from the coveted corner office of a CEO but from a small area in our homes dedicated to our computer station.

that there was a great change in the mid to late 80s, a change driven by corporate greed that was in turn driven by the possibility of utilizing shortcuts in ways that were sometimes untenable.

(As we spoke, I found myself agreeing with her 100%. In my mind's eye I could see Gordon Gecko, the infamous stockbroker of Wall Street fame, trumpeting "Greed is good!" That snippet of movie dialogue became the motto of a generation of entrepreneurs; sadly the unrelenting greed has far outlived the greed of the original "yuppies" of that time.)

A savvy businesswoman, Lita recognizes that many investors saw the emerging medical transcription industry as an easy way to make money. Hospitals cut entire transcription departments, and the so-called "matchbook schools" emerged. A generation of people (mostly women) who wanted to work at home were exploited by transcription schools who offered very little and left these women financially poorer and ill-prepared for what turned out to be the daunting challenge of being a truly excellent transcriptionist.

An engaging, enthusiastic person, Lita would make an ideal mentor for an up and coming MT. In a different time and place, perhaps some of you who are reading this article could actually have had the good fortune of working with her in a hospital transcription department or having her as a mentor. She offers two solid pieces of advice for today's MT. Her words of advice ring true. The guidance she offers is this:

1. Focus on the skills you have.
2. Be proficient in everything.

To this, I would add one further caveat, one which is, ironically enough, very difficult for me to do myself: Be flexible. I am very much a creature of habit. This is a good trait in that it frequently supports a person who is very organized, but it can be a drawback in that it hampers one from being willing to jump off that high board and learn new things. As I have grown older, I have learned to strike a balance between rigidity and flexibility. Doing so has been the most important lesson I have learned about medical transcription in this decade.

Someone once sarcastically uttered the phrase "Change or die." At the time I heard it, I was frightened. Since then, I have come to see the wisdom of this phrase. We live in an era of change and of speed. We have instant everything—instant food, instant communication, instant transcription, or if not in fact "instant," pretty darn near to it, what with today's lightning-quick turnaround times.

As MTs, we need to stay aware of what is happening, not just in the MT world, but in the business world as well. Medical transcription does not exist as an entity separate from the rest of the marketplace, and it is a wise MT who reads at least one financial publication monthly and has some basic financial (and investing) savvy. We need to run our businesses like the businesses they are—even if we are a business of one and we operate not from the coveted corner office of a CEO but from a small area in our homes dedicated to our computer station.

I lightheartedly remind you that you do not need to be wearing Jimmy Choo shoes and corporate drag to cast yourself in a professional role. You do need to begin to think in terms of profit and loss, of what works for you and what doesn't, and what you are willing and not willing to accept. There is no MTSO in the world who will give you everything you ask for or think you need, but there are, alas, plenty of them who will engage in exploitative tactics. Know your rights as an employee and insist upon them. In return, give your very best, every hour of every day you work. (And if you are as fortunate as I am and work for a company that truly values its transcriptionists and treats them well, respond in kind and treat your MTSO like gold.) As Vera Pyle was fond of saying, "You deserve the kind of treatment you will accept."

The transcription world is light-years away from the world I stepped into four decades ago as a poor but motivated graduate student. At that time, I sought no more than to make a paycheck to pay the rent on a modest furnished room and to put food on table. I have gotten so much more from this profession. It has been the source of unending challenge, of learning, of the opportunity to meet many people who taught me so many things. It also has been the source of pain as I have seen the profession I loved transmogrified into a corporate tool, more frequently than not at the expense of the women and men who made it. I lament the death of the small mom and pop services that gave so many MTs their start; they simply could not keep up with the financial big boys (and girls).

Still and all, I have honest hope for the future. We need to stay alert, to prepare ourselves for the ongoing changes that are inevitable, to not fight them but to embrace them as the opportunities they are, and to realize that perhaps, the truth inherent in the adage that the ancient Chinese character for *crisis* is actually composed of two characters: Danger + opportunity.

Sidney K. Moormeister, Ph.D., holds doctoral degrees in forensic sciences and forensic psychology. She enjoys the stark desert beauty of Utah, where she is actively engaged in the serious study of Latin, enjoying wild animals, and writing for various publications in English and in French. She is the founder of the Voltaire Reading Circle. Veteran of 4000+ autopsies, she is a Life Fellow of the American College of Forensic Examiners and a member of the California Coroners Association.

