

# The Four-Semester Myth

*Given a certain set of criteria, it can be predicted with accuracy that it takes about 500 hours of transcription practice to produce an entry-level medical transcriptionist.*

by Linda C. Campbell, CMT

As the concert pianist walked onto the stage, a round of enthusiastic applause swelled from the audience. Her walk was regal, her countenance serene. As she made her way toward the Steinway in center stage, she nodded her head in the direction of the patrons in acknowledgment of their praise.

She poised her hands over the piano keys; then her fingers began to dance over them, coaxing from them incredible sounds. The strains of Rachmaninoff's Piano Concerto No. 3, delivered with delicate precision and emotion, filled the auditorium. My ten-year-old daughter, Samantha, and I exchanged glances of wonderment as the artist's fingers moved up and down the keyboard—effortless, expressive, consuming.

At the conclusion of the performance, a standing ovation, and several curtain calls, we stepped out into the night air feeling dazzled and happy, talking about what we had just seen. What made this one so special? We had been to the symphony before; certainly we'd seen other piano performances. But tonight's was different.

We tried to identify the qualities that set this artist apart from others we had seen. She was trained in the classics, that much was obvious; she had the aptitude, the desire to excel, the drive to practice to perfection. But it was more than that, we decided. It had to do with having "the ear," the ability to understand the nuances the composer envisioned, being able to translate that mentally so that the music flowed from her head through her fingers to the keys.

The subject changed to tomorrow's activity schedule. Samantha had school, I had work. She reminded me of my promise to give her a copy of *The Medical Transcription Workbook*, a project that had all but consumed me the previous summer. She enjoys reading about medical transcription and

looking through all of my reference books, but she long ago decided she wants to be a doctor.

Not wanting to miss the opportunity to explain the importance of medical transcription to a future doctor, we talked about the process of transcribing—or translating—the spoken word into written language.

Translation is an interesting process. It cannot be done by one who is not thoroughly versed in two languages. As a child I remember watching the movie *Fail Safe*, where the fate of the world rested squarely on the shoulders of the man who translated Russian to English. Larry Hagman (pre-*Jeannie* and *Dallas*) portrayed the character whose job it was to interpret not just what the Russian premier was saying, but all the nuances as well that might provide a clue to what the premier was thinking. The wrong interpretation could end the world.

It became my responsibility in recent years to prepare permission slips for Girl Scout outings. It was an unremarkable task, for the most part, until I was faced with the monumental last-minute challenge of translating a permission slip from English to Spanish. Equipped with my high-school-level Spanish skills and a Spanish-English dictionary, I began the arduous task of translation. It was not easy, and I knew that word-for-word translation from English to Spanish might not properly convey the intended meaning. The next day a friend who was fluent in both languages checked my effort. I was disappointed, but not surprised, to find that I had consistently missed the mark. The words were all there, but their sequence was often wrong, and I overlooked the fact that I had learned Castilian Spanish as opposed to colloquial Spanish. It was like the difference between British English and American English.

To learn a new language, one must not merely study but actually use the knowledge in verbal exchanges with those who

## PIANO

Music theory  
Practice on authentic piano  
Progress from simple to complex  
Utilize a variety of music  
Repetition  
Mastery

## FOREIGN LANGUAGE

Language theory  
Practice learning nouns and verbs  
Progress from simple to complex  
Utilize a variety of words and phrases  
Repetition  
Mastery

## MEDICAL TRANSCRIPTION

Transcription theory  
Practice on authentic dictation  
Progress from simple to complex  
Utilize a variety of dictation  
Repetition  
Mastery

are fluent. It's not something that can be merely taught—it must be experienced. Formal instruction is the frame; practice and repetition are the picture.

*It's the same with music.*

*It's the same with medical transcription.*

There has been, and continues to be, great debate surrounding “the making of a medical transcriptionist.” There is the theory that if medical transcription were a degreed profession, it would garner respect and acknowledgment as a legitimate healthcare profession in the eyes of the medical community.

Then there's the opinion (and I cringe as I write this) that medical transcription is “just typing medical words.” This is an opinion that is shared by many physicians, administrators, and even supervisors—not all of them, of course, but enough of them to keep medical transcription in the basement (figuratively, and sometimes literally). Certainly it has helped keep compensation from increasing commensurate with that of other healthcare workers over the last 20 years.

To combat this skewed philosophy, leaders in the medical transcription industry have strived admirably, if not effectively, to turn things around. Not long ago I participated in a curriculum-writing session with a group of very talented and well-respected transcriptionists. Our goal that day was to improve an association's curriculum and bring it up to date. One of the workshop leaders was a very outspoken woman, a leader in the medical transcription community. She was adamant about four semesters and was convinced the two-year degree program was the best environment in which to teach medical transcription. She also believed it was the key to achieving recognition for working MTs. She was eloquent, passionate, persuasive, and rigid. And she was wrong.

It is the number of practice hours that produces competency, not the number of semesters.

It's the same with music.

It's the same for interpreters.

Recognition comes with competence. Competence comes with achievement. Achievement comes with repetition and practice. Here's a true occurrence that illustrates this point.

A bright, articulate woman who taught medical transcription at the community college level was anxious to show me her four-semester associate-degree MT curriculum. She had worked diligently to develop and implement this program, and many prominent people in the MT community considered it to be the zenith of programs—a standard for others to follow. It was with great anticipation that I examined it.

The curriculum included many important ancillary classes. There was medical terminology I and II, anatomy and physiology, basic English review, keyboarding and word processing,

legal issues, hospital records management, and business procedures. There were 1200 clock hours allotted to the entire program over four semesters.

At first pass it seemed ideal. Twelve hundred clock hours! Very few medical transcription programs provided that much time. But a closer look revealed that students would be expected to transcribe only 1-1/2 hours of nonphysician dictation the first year and 6 hours of physician dictation the second year! With a sinking feeling I realized that her students wouldn't have the requisite skills to perform even basic medical transcription. To the instructor's credit, she had a clinical externship (practicum) in place. It was clear, though, that her students would be getting most of their core dictation experience on the job rather than in class. It was totally unnecessary, and it was a bitter disappointment.

In a follow-up discussion with the instructor, I asked her how she came to develop this specific program. It seems she had followed, very faithfully, a list of competencies for building a curriculum. She had even implemented the medical transcription lab according to these competencies. Although there had been provided a specific number of hours for the practicum period, no such guidelines were given for the medical transcription practice lab.

Despite rumors to the contrary, it actually is possible to predict how many hours of transcription practice time it will take to produce an entry-level medical transcriptionist. Most people in a position of authority in this industry refuse to go out on this limb; nevertheless, given a certain set of criteria, it can be predicted with accuracy that it takes about 500 hours of transcription practice (30+ hours of dictation).

This does *not* mean 500 hours transcribing 30 hours of canned dictation.

This does *not* mean 500 hours transcribing six hours of physician dictation.

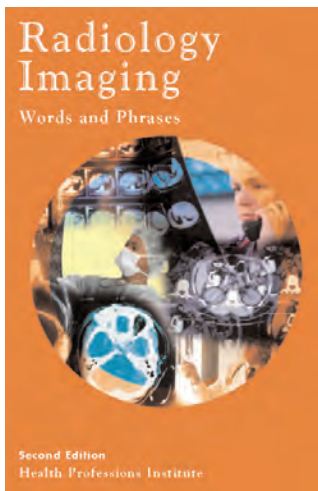
What this *does* mean is 500 hours transcribing hundreds of authentic physician dictations from a variety of dictators, incorporating all report types with varying levels of difficulty.

This method works. It has been proven many times over, especially where *The SUM Program* materials are used. It has been proven with students in formal educational facilities and in other settings, including home-based students.

Am I saying that those other classes—anatomy, terminology, medical science, and so on—are expendable? No, certainly not. Education in these areas, which has historically been lacking in on-the-job-trained MTs, is vital to that knowledge base. These classes should complement medical transcription practice, not replace it. And the practicum should be used to refine and expand the student's knowledge, not teach basics.

Is it possible to have 500 hours of medical transcription practice in a four-semester curriculum? Absolutely. The instructor who had 1200 clock hours could have used 500 of those hours for transcription lab, leaving 700 hours for ancillary classes—plenty of time to accomplish both academic study and technical learning.

These 500 hours can also be incorporated into a technical/vocational curriculum. Health Professions Institute has



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**W**hether it be piano, foreign language, or medical transcription, the mechanism of learning is the same— theory, practice, repetition, mastery. We must never lose sight of the fact that formal instruction is the frame; practice and repetition are the picture.

“Five hundred hours!” That should be the battle cry, not four semesters.

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