

# Chapter 1

## Just the Facts

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### *In This Chapter*

- ▶ Looking below the surface to see what medical transcriptionists really do
  - ▶ Surveying employment options and paycheck possibilities
  - ▶ Identifying the skills medical transcriptionists need
  - ▶ Taking a peek at the reports you'll transcribe
  - ▶ Charting a career in medical transcription
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**I**f you're considering a career in medical transcription, there are some things you should know. The very first is that what medical transcriptionists (MTs) actually do all day is a whole lot more interesting and much more difficult than what most people think. Typing fast while listening to someone speak in tongues over headphones is just the tip of the iceberg.

Okay, the dictator isn't really speaking in tongues, but it often sounds like she is, and the iceberg part is completely true. In this chapter, you'll explore the 90 percent of medical transcription that most people never see because it's out of sight, just like the largest part of an iceberg.

If you've heard that a lot of MTs work from home, you are, indeed, well informed. For many MTs, the daily commute is no farther than the walk from their breakfast table to their home office. Some MTs commute to their place of work, just like other employees, although these seem to be dwindling in number.

Medical transcription work has many attributes that attract people looking for a fresh career start. You can train and work from practically anywhere you can get an Internet connection, including your home. Nobody cares what you look like or how old you are; the only thing that matters is whether you can do the job well. Schedules often can be juggled so that you can work around other commitments.

It's not all peaches and cream, however. Medical transcription can be high-stress work, and you aren't likely to get rich doing it. It takes a particular set of personality traits and technical skills to survive and thrive in an MT career. This chapter introduces the world of medical transcription, so that you can decide if you want to become a part of it.

## *Getting the Skinny on the Medical Transcription Field*

A medical transcriptionist's job is to produce the clearest, most accurate healthcare documentation possible — and do it fast. Within the course of a day, a patient who comes into a hospital emergency room and is admitted with appendicitis will generate:

- ✓ An emergency room (ER) report
- ✓ Probably a CT scan or ultrasound of the abdomen
- ✓ A consultation with a gastroenterologist and/or a surgeon
- ✓ A complete preoperative history and physical examination
- ✓ An operative report detailing the appendectomy
- ✓ Potentially periodic progress notes
- ✓ A discharge summary when sent home the next day

And all of them require transcription. That's one patient, one hospital, one overnight stay. Multiply that by the number of patients who walk into hospitals each day, seven days a week.

Hospitals aren't the only prodigious producers of medical reports. Physician practices, specialty clinics, alternative health practitioners, managed care organizations, diagnostic facilities, and lots of other places all generate dictation every day.

These are the records that healthcare providers return to time and again when deciding what treatments a patient will receive immediately and in the future. They're also legal documents. They may be used to determine whether someone is eligible to receive disability benefits and how much. In some cases, they'll be pulled out when determining compensation for an injury or death that occurred as the result of someone else's actions.

MT work is interesting, intellectually challenging, and a whole lot harder than people who've never done it can imagine. Many people spend good money on MT training, only to find that they don't like doing medical transcription, and it doesn't like them much either. Other people absolutely love it. The people who love it tend to share certain personality traits. Top among them are

- ✓ A love of language and a passion for learning
- ✓ The desire and ability to work independently and sometimes under pressure
- ✓ A perfectionistic streak that makes attention to tiny details come naturally

## *Where the jobs are*

MTs work in hospitals, physician practices, and other types of facilities. Many MTs are employed by medical transcription service organizations (MTSOs). An MTSO is a service bureau for medical transcription work. Many medical facilities that used to perform transcription in house now outsource it to MTSOs, making them a top source of MT employment.

It's hard to say exactly how many people are currently doing MT work. The Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS) estimates that nearly 79,000 MTs were on employer payrolls in 2010. There are actually a lot more than that, because BLS figures don't include self-employed MTs, of which there are many. Self-employed MTs work as independent contractors (ICs), providing transcription services to one or more transcription clients.

## *How much they pay*

MT earnings are hard to pin down for similar reasons: A lot of people aren't counted. The BLS figures put the 2011 average annual wage for MTs across all industries at \$34,050 and the hourly wage at \$16.37. MTs working for medical and diagnostic laboratories or for general hospitals earn more than the average. Employees of business support services earn a bit less.

The BLS has the largest pool of pay data, but because it doesn't include self-employed MTs, it's a very incomplete picture. Figures available through Salary.com are more current, though less extensive. As of May 2012, Salary.com reported the average MT base salary to be \$38,695.

Although MT pay is reported using hourly and annual figures, it's usually calculated based on production. MTs typically earn a fixed amount for each line they transcribe. An MT making 8 cpl (cents per line) would earn \$100 for transcribing 1250 lines ( $1250 \times 0.08 = \$100$ ).

The number of lines a transcriptionist produces in any given day is affected by many factors. Some MTs have a target number of lines and work until they reach it; others work a set number of hours and transcribe as many lines as they can within that time. If you're quick and have good dictation to work with, you can really crank out the reports and rack up your line count. On the downside, a string of really terrible dictators can slow your production and, thus, your earnings to a virtual standstill and make you feel like pulling your hair out.

To really dig into the details of MT job options and pay, head to Chapter 3.

## *What it takes to break in*

You don't need a license or certification to work as an MT, but formal training is an absolute must. Without it, no one will hire you. Even if you could miraculously wrangle your way in the door, to survive on the job, you're going to need to tune up skills you already have and learn entirely new ones. There are two really good places to get MT training:

- ✔ **Community colleges:** Community college programs come with the benefits of classmates, a fixed schedule to keep you on track, and face-to-face interaction with your instructors.
- ✔ **Online MT schools:** Online programs free you to study on your own schedule, without leaving home. Online courses can be a great option for people with the self-discipline to study regularly and stay on track.

Either type of training will provide you all the skills needed to get out of the starting gate.



The quality of MT training programs varies greatly, and choosing a bad one can be an expensive and frustrating mistake. Chapter 4 provides additional information to help you choose wisely.

Studying to become an MT is guaranteed to be interesting, but it won't be as quick as some advertisements may lead you to believe. Fast learners with plenty of time to devote to studying can complete an MT training program in about nine months. Most students require a bit longer. If you'll be fitting studying in around a busy family life and/or a job, plan on a year or even two.

MT employers expect even new MTs to arrive ready to hit the ground running, although you'll continue to learn on the job. Absorb and practice as much as you possibly can while a student — you'll be really glad you did later. While you're at it, earn the highest GPA you possibly can. The higher your GPA, the easier it will be for you to land your first MT job.

Before you plunk down tuition and devote yourself to MT training (or decide not to), be sure to read Chapter 22. There's quite a bit of MT fiction floating around, and Chapter 22 tackles it head-on.

## *Looking at What Goes into Good Transcription*

A lot more goes into producing the neat, clear medical reports we all prefer to have in our health records than is apparent by reading them. MTs remove

ambiguities, clean up jargon, and catch inadvertent errors that could prove catastrophic if they slipped by unnoticed. They take often messy input and turn it into a report that's clear to everyone who reads it going forward, not just the person who originally dictated it. And they have to do it quickly, or else it's cheerio, old chap — good luck in your next career!

To accomplish these feats, MTs apply skills that go far beyond listening well and typing fast. Truly understanding the language of medicine ranks at the top. It's not just a matter of memorization, thank goodness! Memorizing even a fraction of the 120,000-plus terms in a standard 2,000-page medical dictionary would take a very, very long time. MTs don't have to do that, because most medical terms are built from a set of reusable parts, combined and recombined to generate new meanings. MTs know the parts and how they work together. That makes the meaning of even unfamiliar terms instantly recognizable, and conveniently also possible to spell and pronounce. Without this knowledge, recognizing a term like *choledocholithotomy* the first time you heard it would be nearly impossible; with it, it's a piece of cake. Chapter 5 provides a crash course on exactly how to do this.

Not all core MT skills are as fun as mastering medical lingo, but they're necessary nonetheless. Not coincidentally, the better you are at them, the more successful your MT career will be. A solid MT

- ✔ Has a well-stocked arsenal of tips and tricks for deciphering difficult dictators, whether they be mumblers, speed talkers, or people who haven't mastered speaking English to the same degree that they've mastered practicing medicine
- ✔ Is an expert on the nuances of formatting, punctuating, and capitalizing every aspect of medical reports according to industry standards
- ✔ Knows how to quickly sleuth out details to confirm, rule out, or pin down a slippery word, phrase, medication dosage, facility name, or anything else
- ✔ Is well versed in MT productivity tools and techniques, so they can transcribe as quickly and efficiently as possible

The MT uses all these skills to do one, not-so-simple thing: transcribe a health-care provider's spoken words into a neat, clear, and accurate medical report.

## *Anticipating What You'll Transcribe*

A lot of MT work involves transcribing a core set of reports nicknamed the Big Four. They're so central that this book dedicates a chapter to each of them. They are

- ✓ History and Physical examinations (H&P; Chapter 10)
- ✓ Consultations (Chapter 11)
- ✓ Operative reports (Chapter 12)
- ✓ Discharge and death summaries (Chapter 13)

The Big Four make up a large share of MT work, but they're accompanied by a huge constellation of other report types. For starters, an incredible variety of diagnostic procedures is used to probe the human body and pinpoint what's gone awry, ranging from EEGs to echocardiograms and Doppler ultrasounds, to overnight sleep studies where the patient is wired up to more sensors than a crash-test dummy and every breath recorded and analyzed. All these diagnostic studies generate reports that need to be transcribed.

Another large batch of transcription work arrives in the form of routine office notes and progress reports. They come from checking up on Mr. Smith's diabetes, diagnosing Mrs. Jones's pregnancy with twins, and following up on Grandpa Bill's long list of age-related ailments. These give you a true cross-section of the human condition and make you appreciate your own health.

MTs also transcribe special-purpose reports, such as psychiatric assessments, autopsy reports, and independent medical evaluations (IMEs), among others.

## *Making a Career of Medical Transcription*

Somewhere between deciding you're about ready to hit the job market and starting to polish up your résumé, you're going to have to make a few key decisions, among them:

- ✓ **What type of medical transcription do you want to do?** Some MTs are eager to dive in to a fast-paced acute care transcription environment; others find working for a small physician group or clinic more attractive. Becoming a specialist in a field like diagnostic radiology is an option, though it's one that's not widely available to entry-level MTs.
- ✓ **Do you want to work as an independent contractor or as an employee?** MTs can find work as either an employee or as an IC. Both are very common, but they're quite different propositions. The first is an employer-employee relationship; the other, a business-to-business (B2B) relationship. Each has pros and cons to consider:

- Employees are under the direct control of an employer. They have to do what the employer dictates, including working particular hours, working extra hours, or using specific methods. It's the kind of arrangement that anyone who's ever held even a part-time job is familiar with.
- Independent contractors, on the other hand, are self-employed. An IC is essentially running a business providing MT services. ICs have greater control over their work schedule and workload. They do, however, have to take on more taxes and don't get to take advantage of employer-provided benefits. There's a lot more to the IC picture, so if it's on your list of possibilities, check out Chapter 19 for a detailed look at the financial ins and outs of working as an IC.

Once you start job shopping, you'll quickly discover that one-stop job boards like CareerBuilder ([www.careerbuilder.com](http://www.careerbuilder.com)) and Monster ([www.monster.com](http://www.monster.com)) contain a bountiful supply of MT openings. Unfortunately, nearly all of them seek applicants with at least two years of experience, something that newly graduated MTs just don't have. Fortunately, there are better places to look first anyway. In fact, your first (or your next) MT job may be as nearby as your training school's list of connections. That's one of the best places to start a fresh job search. Online MT communities and professional relationships are top resources, too. As with any other career, there's no guarantee there will be a slew of employers waiting for you with open arms the minute you graduate. Some new graduates find employment right away; others really have to work at it.

MT employers routinely require applicants to pass a skills test as part of the application process. Just when you thought you were done with those pesky things, too! Pre-employment tests are an easy way for employers to weed out people who think they're qualified but really aren't. Take it as a piece of job security and further evidence that MT work is much more skilled than it appears on the surface. Your first test probably will be a little nerve-racking, but if you know your stuff, you'll pass with flying colors.

Once you're on the job, you'll discover something else about MT work that most people don't know: At times, it's really quite entertaining. When a doctor says something like "The patient came to see me today because she wants to get pregnant," or "He denies a foul odor to his diarrhea," how can you help but laugh?

MTs learn something new each and every day. It may be an interesting term, like *furuncle*, or running across HELLP syndrome or Christmas disease for the first time.

Medicine and technology are inextricably intertwined, and both evolve at an astounding rate. As an MT, you'll need to evolve with them. It helps to be a passionate learner, as most MTs are.

Some of the largest changes right now involve the widely trumpeted arrival of speech recognition technology (SRT) and the federally mandated move to electronic health records (EHRs). Some people think these two things spell doom for the medical transcription field. Those are primarily the same people who focus on the top 10 percent of an iceberg and completely ignore the other 90 percent.

For example, speech recognition has come a long way, but MTs who clean up after it call it “speech wreck” for a reason. Only a computer can take “This is a 5-foot 6, 145-pound male” and turn it into “This is a 5-foot, 6, 145-pound male,” or mindlessly record that a male patient underwent a radical hysterectomy. This is the kind of stuff that’s going to replace medical transcriptionists? What a terrifying prospect from the patient’s perspective! Medical malpractice attorneys and insurance providers must find it horrifying as well.

These particular boo-boos never made it into patient records, because MTs caught and corrected them first. But things like them occur all the time. Sometimes as many as 40 to 50 in a two-minute dictation. I couldn’t find a single MT who has ever seen an error-free SRT report. Not one, ever. Obviously, “speech wreck” won’t be replacing MTs any time soon. In fact, in some ways, it provides job security.

EHR is not likely to eliminate the need for MTs either. Healthcare providers need a way to include free-form opinions and discussion. Dictation provides it, and MTs are integral to making dictation work.

Things like new technologies and healthcare legislation impact how an MT carries out her job. The underlying mission, however, remains the same: to produce the most clear and accurate healthcare documentation possible, and do it fast! If you think that’s something you could learn to do, and want to do, then an MT career may be in your future. This book is here to help you decide if you and medical transcription are a good match. If the answer turns out to be yes, it’s also here to help you make it happen.