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Interview with Samoan-English Specialist Mental Health Interpreter Hoy Neng Wong Soon

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Abstract

This interview was conducted with Hoy Neng Wong Soon, a specialist mental health Samoan-language interpreter from Aotearoa New Zealand³. Hoy Neng combines her work as a research project manager with the Pacific Islands Families Study with interpreting and translating and also works as a health interpreter and translator educator. Her experiences offer interpreters and educators an insight into mental health settings and into the very demanding area of forensic psychiatry. She is based in Auckland, Aotearoa New Zealand.

Keywords: interpreters and interpreter education; interpreting in mental health settings; forensic psychiatry interpreting; Samoan language interpreting.

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³ Aotearoa New Zealand is increasingly used by many New Zealanders to recognize the name given to New Zealand by Māori. Aotearoa means 'land of the long white cloud' in Te Reo Māori, the Māori language.

Interview with Samoan-English Specialist Mental Health Interpreter Hoy Neng Wong Soon

Hoy Neng Wong Soon is a Samoan-English interpreter, translator, and editor. She holds a Master of Health Science degree and teaches health interpreting and translation at Auckland University of Technology. She also works as a Project Manager with the Pacific Islands Families Study. Hoy Neng was recently awarded a doctoral scholarship in the area of health navigation.

Jo Anna Burn is a linguist who also trained in law. She has been a legal interpreter educator at the Auckland University of Technology for over 10 years and has published widely on a variety of topics, including innovative approaches to non-language-specific legal interpreter education, legal discourse, community translation, and language maintenance.

Jo Anna: How long have you been working as a specialist mental health interpreter?

Hoy Neng: I have been working as a specialist mental health interpreter since 2008. I often work at the Mason Clinic in Auckland, New Zealand. The Mason Clinic is a secure unit that offers integrated forensic mental health services to the courts and prisons, and general mental health services in the Northern Region of New Zealand.

Jo Anna: What prompted you to work in this field?

Hoy Neng: I was able to specialize as an interpreter in the mental health area because Samoan-English interpreters who were called to work in forensic psychiatry settings such as the Mason Clinic and other mental health settings were often declining such assignments or reported feeling traumatized, sometimes giving other reasons not to work with psychiatric patients. I saw this opportunity as a challenge for me but rewarding because through interpreting I am helping the Samoan community to the best of my ability.

Jo Anna: What other kind of settings do you work in?

Hoy Neng: I work in any setting, from court hearings to interviews at police stations, secure mental health units, hospitals, and parole hearings.

Jo Anna: Is it always face-to-face work, or do you sometimes work over the telephone or via audiovisual link?

Hoy Neng: I almost always work face-to-face, but for some bookings I do telephone or video interpreting. I prefer face-to-face work because I like to interact with clients, patients, and professionals. When it comes to interpreting, no assignment is the same and that is what makes it more interesting and fun for me because I learn from all these different experiences, clinics, and other settings.

Hoy Neng Wong Soon: Samoan-English Interpreter

Jo Anna: How do you prepare for an assignment?

Hoy Neng: You have to have a very good understanding of every mental health condition before attending such assignments. It helps to know and prepare for each client you might be working with in a clinic. The booking clerk can provide information, so ask for it! Every patient, every clinic, every case, and every support person is different.

When interpreting at a parole review hearing you should be aware that the outcome can result in some prisoners being deported back to their country of origin. Your understanding of the New Zealand legal system and legal terminology is very important.

Jo Anna: Do you recommend taking a specialized course of study?

Hoy Neng: I believe that there should be a specialized course of study when it comes to mental health interpreting and that interpreters should be well trained for these settings. With some patients it is easier to relay their words, but others may not be mentally stable, and I have to be very conscious of that when interpreting their responses. This is why I usually interpret the utterances of patients with very severe mental disorders word-for-word. This is to help health professionals and the legal team or parole board panel with their diagnoses and decisions regarding patients. We may know about mental illnesses, but each case and patient is unique, and each may differ in terms of the severity of their condition.

There are cases where I can grammatically structure my sentences when interpreting because these patients talk normally. But there are other patients with severe mental illnesses who jump from one topic to another and most of the time it will not make sense to any “sane” person. However, health professionals such as psychiatrists or psychologists understand their patients and their conditions, and the way I interpret helps these health professionals to register and then to be able to diagnose the severity of the patient’s mental condition. Most of the patients I have worked with tend to talk about spirits. Such patients may be conveying memories they have from a period of their lives but then they mix it with some details from out of this world. In other words, they hallucinate for some short periods of time and when this happens, health professionals ask me to relay whatever the patient is saying. I even copy whatever actions accompany a patient’s words so health professionals can see what actions go with what utterances. I believe this may help them with their diagnoses.

One of the most important things that interpreters need to know is that they should always be alert and aware of their surroundings when they are interpreting in a mental health clinic. Not all patients are calm. An interpreter’s safety is paramount at all times! This applies to staff, patients, and health professionals too – safety should be a priority.

Jo Anna: Have you ever been frightened or felt unsafe at work?

Hoy Neng: Yes, I was a bit frightened and nervous when I went to my first job at the mental health clinic. When I found out that I would be interpreting for a patient with very severe mental health problems, I was advised to stay with the clinic guard who would accompany me to the meeting room where I would be interpreting for the psychiatrist and the patient. I was also warned that there would be other patients roaming the floor and that I must at all times stay close to the clinic guard or whoever was accompanying me inside the ward. Although I felt frightened, I did not feel unsafe because I had health professionals and the guards with me. Even so, I still made sure that I followed any advice that I was given during the briefing time prior to entering the wards.

Jo Anna: What other challenges do interpreters face? For example, isn't it very stressful?

Hoy Neng: Consultations at the Mason Clinic are very traumatic ones and many interpreters cannot handle the severity of these jobs; they might be interpreting in very difficult situations, for instance, those involving physical violence, incest and child rape. You have to remember that these are prisoners with very severe mental health conditions. Personally, I have never asked for counselling after consultations at the Mason Clinic and other similar clinics. At some point I did feel overwhelmed by the accounts or situations I was asked to interpret in, but I told myself, “I am making a difference and I can handle this. I am helping my people and community.” I used negative experiences and stories I heard from my clients to motivate me to look at the brighter side of being an interpreter and working in the mental health area.

Hoy Neng Wong Soon: Samoan-English Interpreter

Jo Anna: Are you ever called on to sight-translate documents? Can you give some examples please?

Hoy Neng: Yes, many times! I sight-translate documents such as medication lists, the medications that the patient would be taking, the dosage, and why the patient has been prescribed the medication. I sight-translate documents relating to summaries from health specialists such as psychiatrists, and consent forms so that patients and their families are aware of the treatments and so on that the patient is recommended to have. There are also letters from families that I need to skim through to explain to the health professionals what is in the letters. By reading through and then sight-translating the correspondence from the family members who give accounts of their experiences or views, I can then make the health professionals aware of what may have triggered the symptoms the patients are displaying.

Jo Anna: How do you relax after a job? Do you ever ruminate on difficult experiences?

Hoy Neng: My job as an interpreter is very busy and can be draining – physically, mentally, and emotionally. Yes, the cases that I interpret in may seem potentially very traumatic, but I do not let them take over my life or my thoughts, either at work or at home. After every job, I make sure to leave what I learnt in the room where I worked. If I were not to do that, then it would affect me and people around me. I also believe that it would in a way be breaching the privacy of the patients and health professionals. I take pride in acting in a professional manner and reflect on every assignment I do, so that I can use any newly gained knowledge to develop skills and perfect them in my next assignment. That way, I know that I can provide the best interpreting to any of the clients, patients, and professionals I work with.

Jo Anna: What advice would you give to an interpreter who wants to work in this field?

Hoy Neng: Leave your work at the workplace after every assignment. See also the commentary by Crezee et al. (2015), which advises interpreters to practice selfcare during and after assignments. Also, these are psychiatric patients who are also prisoners. Interpret every movement, facial expression, tone, etc. This will help health professionals with their diagnosis and treatment report. If it is a parole review hearing, then do the same! In some consultations, patients are running or walking on a treadmill or doing some form of exercise or “work,” and you do what you need to do – interpret! See also Jim Hlavac’s (2017) very helpful guidelines for interpreting in mental health settings.

Always ask for help if a job is affecting you in any way. In New Zealand, District Health Boards⁴ have services for their interpreters if needed

Each day is a different experience as I work with different patients with different mental health conditions and health and legal professionals – I take it as a new learning experience. It is professional development and remember that you are doing good and necessary work.

Jo Anna: What makes interpreting between English and Samoan particularly challenging?

Hoy Neng: When it comes to medical conditions (mental health), I have to unpack very complex concepts into informal everyday Samoan words so that clients and patients understand the message that I am trying to relay. English health language is very complex, too, but trying to interpret it into Samoan can be 10 times more complex because I firstly have to understand the medical concepts in order for me to interpret them. Samoan, our heritage language, has a very limited health lexicon, and it is very difficult to provide equivalents for most health terms in English. And it is even more difficult to find equivalents when interpreting in mental health settings. I need to understand each medical concept in order to unpack the message precisely and in detail for the patients I am interpreting for.

⁴ New Zealand is currently (2020) divided into 20 District Health Boards that receive funding from the Ministry of Health to deliver a wide range of primary, secondary, and tertiary healthcare services to people in their catchment areas (see <http://www.waitematadhb.govt.nz/Hospitals-Clinics/Regional-Forensic-Psychiatric-Services>).

Hoy Neng Wong Soon: Samoan-English Interpreter

I will finish with an example to illustrate this. If the doctor says to a patient, “You have malignant pleural effusion,” I will interpret this as:

Samoan translation (spoken): O le tulaga o le gasegase lea ua maua ai nei oe, ua iai le vai i le vaega oloo iai ou mama ma e mafua mai lenei mea ona o le tulaga ogaoga tele o lou kanesa o le mama.

Back translation: The condition of the illness that you have now, you have water/fluid at the part where your lungs are located at and the reason why this thing has happened/is happening is because of the seriousness of your lung cancer.

Jo Anna: Thank you very much for this interview, *Hoy:* fa'afetai tele lava – thank you very much.

Hoy Neng: E le afaina – you're welcome.

References

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