

## **RECOGNISING OUR HUMANNESS**

Minimising the impact of interpreting on our professional  
and personal selves.

AUSIT 13<sup>th</sup> NATIONAL ANNUAL GENERAL MEETING

JILL BLEWETT MEMORIAL LECTURE

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I feel privileged to be invited to present the Jill Blewett Memorial Lecture. I did not personally know Jill Blewett however a respected colleague of mine, Mr. John Flynn was fortunate enough to be on the NAATI Board with her. John's recollections of Jill were as a "committed educator...very interested in our moves to create NAATI Sign language interpreting testing and a great support in our early struggles."

I, like one of your former distinguished speakers, Dr Judy Wakabaychi, am not used to speaking my own words in public. It has always been the thoughts of another that have been conveyed to a variety of audiences. Today is quite a different experience for me, my thoughts,...my words,...my own interpretation of the profession as I have experienced it.

In preparing for this presentation I have kept in mind the thoughts of Judy Wakabaychi in her concluding paragraph in which she stated:

### **Overhead Transparency 1**

***"I would like to think that one day soon this memorial lecture will be presented not by an I/T educator like myself or by an eminent person from outside the profession, but by a full-time professional interpreter or translator, someone who has given thought to his or her work and who is willing and capable of sharing these reflections with colleagues. Then, and only then, will we truly hear the translator's voice."***

**Dr Judy Wakabayashi**

There are limited opportunities for exchanging our experiences and learning and after much thought, (and prodding from a number of my peers) I agreed to stand before you today to reveal a little of 'that' voice...the practitioners' voice. As I am an interpreter I am sure you will allow me the liberty of 'interpreting' and conveying my own translation of what this 'voice' means to me.

The 'voice' I am going to speak of to you today is the inner voice which speaks to all of us at every assignment and yet which we rarely, if ever, dare to reveal to others in the profession. It is a 'voice' which declares our humanness, but which is undervalued and in a sense loathed and largely ignored by many in the profession. We rarely give ourselves permission to recognise our humanness let alone examine it. Today perhaps the time is right to allow ourselves to examine an area which may be for some confronting and for others reaffirming.

I, like all of you, am constantly reflecting on my practices. Recently these personal reflections have taken on a more formal purpose as a postgraduate student completing a minor thesis, which will hopefully add to the increasing body of Australian research and knowledge we already have about the profession. Recognising that our I/T 'bookshelf' is still quite bare, documenting our thoughts is one way we can move forward as a profession. As practitioners we can be valuable contributors to the profession.

This presentation will briefly explore a little of my minor thesis entitled "*Vicarious Traumatization of Australian Sign Language Interpreters working in a Legal setting*". The study was to establish whether, as a result of interpreting in a legal setting, Sign Language Interpreters are vicariously traumatised or experience stress, culminating in negative physiological, psychological and emotional responses.

Even though the research focuses on Sign Language interpreters working in a legal setting, it is my belief that the study is relevant to all practitioners in the I/T field.

My presentation will include:

- Recognising our human reaction to our work
- Exploring the concept of Vicarious Traumatization and
- Examining our professional reality – is VT a part of this?

It is my hope that my presentation will inform, challenge and stimulate discussion in the I/T sector in what I find a fascinating subject.

### **Recognising our human reaction to our work.**

Interpreters working with a variety of communities are afforded little visibility either in situ or in generic literature. What visibility we do have comes when we are referred to as 'instruments' or 'tools', how we impact on the interaction at hand. It is the 'effect' rather than the interpreter as a professional and a person that is the focus. We are often the 'objects' rather than the 'subjects' and often our voice remains unheard. This 'voice' is often lost when speaking to colleagues and perhaps, may I suggest, is lost to us. In presenting to you today I ask that each of you acknowledge and consider your own 'voice' and how what I am about to explain perhaps raises your awareness of just another facet of ourselves which often remains repressed.

As we are all aware, our profession sees many of us work across a broad range of professions and fields, often in situations where conflict, distress, ignorance and oppression are present in communication. This is no better portrayed than in the recent AUSIT eBulletin, which arrived in my email with a letter from one of our colleagues based in a war-ravaged country. I have watched with interest at the correspondence going back and forth as Australian colleagues consider one interpreter's humanness, appropriateness and choice of support and reality vs. theory.

Despite working in a variety of settings, with the expectation from both communities to provide accurate, impartial and confidential language services, very little is known about the impact such intense situations have on the interpreter. This represents a serious gap in our understanding and identification of such stressors, their impact (both physically and emotionally) and strategies for dealing with such events. Such insight is of value to the industry in developing training courses for interpreters, mentoring programs and continuing interpreter education.

As interpreters and translators we spend much time examining the linguistic process of interpreting and little time thinking about ourselves: what we bring to the work, acknowledging that the work we do is extremely difficult and accepting the reality that the work will evoke a response from all of us. It is time to give ourselves permission to feel and acknowledge those feelings in order to protect and respect ourselves.

## OHT 2

***“Interpreters are people; they have feelings about messages and people they are involved with. These feelings may be mundane ones of interest, anger, amusement or boredom.”***

***Nancy Frishberg 1990***

The work does have an impact on our lives, both positive and negative. The impact also will vary from individual to individual in nature and strength. In understanding this impact and examining our own vulnerabilities as a profession, it will allow us to take steps to prevent, ameliorate and transform the negative impact it has on our lives.

## OHT 3

***“By not giving ourselves permission to have human feelings and foibles and to protect ourselves in ways that are quite respectful of our clients, we can end up protecting ourselves in ways that can do damage.”***

***Dr Karen Saakvitne 1996***

Even though we constantly describe our ability to be impartial everybody has a ‘jaundiced eye’. Is this impartiality really a ‘disassociation’, a defence raised in response to exposure to trauma material? Do interpreters come to rely on denial of this response by intellectualising and removing themselves psychologically from the event? If so, what impact does this have on one’s ability to relate and connect oneself to others? Theory and practice is not always congruent and divergence between textbook ethics and actual everyday practice is a reality.

Interpreters are constantly being challenged to meet the linguistic demands of specialised discourses as well as the demands of work patterns and availability. The changing conditions of our work and the process of professionalism, training, accreditation, code of conduct and professional development exerts pressure on all of us. At all times we are examining our work and comparing it to the theory of what it means to be in the I/T profession. The notion of paying attention to the psychological health of interpreters is yet to make its mark on the profession. Our psychological well being has implications for not only our professional lives but also for our personal lives.

There is a small but rapidly growing body of literature that discusses what occurs when a person, by virtue of their profession, is exposed to another’s traumatic material.

Much of the earlier research examining this phenomenon was done with emergency services personnel and later health/social service providers. To date there are very few investigations into the psychological impact on those working in the I/T profession of routinely dealing with oppressed people in often distressing situations.

#### OHT 4

***“A glimpse into another person’s soul.” We are forced to empathise with our clients in an attempt to really understand the message, “Empathy: the desire to imagine the inner workings of another person’s psyche; to “put your ear to another person’s soul and listen intently to its urgent whisperings. Who are you? What do you feel? What do you think? What means most to you?” When you feel the pain, in Czech author, Milan Kundera’s words, “with someone and for someone,” the ripples of their pain permeates our psyche, just as the ripples of a stone permeate a body of water.”***

***Dr Michael Harvey 2000.***

We may experience more of our client’s emotional pain than we consciously realise. It is human to become numb to the insidious effects of prejudice and injustice that our communities endure and are sensitive to, their distress and rage. Interpreters routinely carry with them stories of subtle and overt discrimination, witnesses to a crime or an act perpetrated by or against our clients. Clients’ disclosure of events and possible their physical and psychological presentation assault the interpreter’s personal beliefs and value systems. This can only challenge interpreters’ professional competence, compromise their psychological and consequently physical health as well as possibly disrupt interpersonal relationships.

As interpreters it is the task of constantly plumbing the depths of linguistics and examining our clients’ psyche that is emotionally draining. Often the ‘success’ of the interpreted interaction is ambiguous. As human beings we fantasise about life’s events having a ‘happy ending’. It is this empathy that is a hazard of the profession that has gone unrecognised. Training is currently insufficient and professional organised support often scarce, dare I say ... unrecognisable to many. Where our clients may incur varying degrees of direct trauma, we may incur varying degrees of vicarious trauma.

#### **Exploring the concept of Vicarious Traumatization**

It is important to firstly differentiate between what it means to have a ‘stressful experience’ and be ‘vicariously traumatised’. Both refer to the individual’s experience in relation to a traumatic event or stressful event in which the individual’s beliefs in oneself and others may be challenged. The difference is the level of demand for re-orientation and re-organisation of beliefs. The effects of vicarious traumatization are cumulative, extending beyond one’s professional life into personal.

## OHT 5

***“...it comes about as a result of empathic engagement with trauma survivors and their trauma material, including graphic descriptions of traumatic events, descriptions of people’s intentional cruelty to one another, and traumatic re-enactments.”***

***McCann & Pearlman 1990***

My research led me to look at the interaction and responses interpreters have between the work and one’s self and the impact these responses have on the individual’s beliefs, memory, world view, identity and psychological needs. I will elaborate on this in a few moments.

The nature of a minor thesis limited the scope of the research and the sample of interpreters was limited to those working in legal settings. For the purposes of this presentation today I will only broadly introduce you to the phenomenon of vicarious traumatisation and say that within the small sample of Auslan interpreters it is a reality. Might I at this point also draw your attention to a research project conducted by Babelea (1999) which investigated the emotional and psychological impact of community interpreting work and the support needs of interpreters in the European community and associated countries. The results of this study paralleled mine.

## OHT 6

- 1. Does not focus on the trauma event but the response an individual has to the event while acknowledging individual difference.**
- 2. It is often described as a ‘road map’, a framework of understanding the effects traumatic events have on one’s self.**
- 3. It acknowledges the ‘developing self’.** We all construct and construe our own interpretation of events, personal realities, while bringing our own unique cognitive schema, assumptions and expectations about ourselves and the world to assist us in making sense of our experiences.
- 4. The theory also identifies the aspects of one’s self that are vulnerable to disruption.**

The ‘components of self’ which are described by this theory are:

## OHT 7

### **Frame of Reference**

This refers to the lens through which we view the world; our sense of spirituality, our identity, our view of the world and our philosophy of life and morals.

### **Self Capacities**

Our capacity to maintain an inner sense of balance, to maintain our sense of self, our inner connectedness with others and affect tolerance. It is how we understand and integrate events around us to maintain this equilibrium.

## **Ego Resources**

Our ability to manage interpersonal relationships and make decisions. This includes the skill of self-awareness, introspection, empathy, humour, initiative and willpower as well as skills important in interpersonal relationships, ability to establish boundaries and make judgements that protect oneself.

There are also five psychological needs that are vulnerable to disruption by traumatic events:

## **OHT 8**

**Safety**

**Intimacy**

**Trust & Dependence**

**Control**

**Esteem**

## **Examining our professional reality – is VT a part of this reality?**

Depending on an individual's psychological makeup and the type of trauma material one is exposed to, any or all of these cognitive schemas or psychological needs may be effected. General signs of VT may include decreased sense of energy, disconnection from loved ones, social withdrawal, no time for self, feelings of threat or fear, increased sensitivity to violence, anxiety, depression, feelings of cynicism, hopelessness and despair.

There are a number of factors that contribute to an individual's risk of being vicariously traumatised. These factors can be broadly categorised as:

## **OHT 9**

**The Situation** (*the Nature of the Work and Nature of the Workplace*),

**The Clientele,**

**The Individual** (*Nature of the Person of the Interpreter*) and the

**Social / Cultural / Political Context.**

Interpreters can be traumatised by simply learning about [interpreting] traumatic events.

For many interpreters, the exposure to pain, trauma and oppression and injustice perpetrated against their communities has radically shaken their worldview and influenced their philosophical and spiritual beliefs. The work is emotionally as well as linguistically draining and leaves us vulnerable to VT.

The risk to the interpreter may increase when traumatic exposures are unexpected, or among those without adequate preparation in the instance of working 'on call'. Anecdotal evidence supporting this statement abounds and I am sure many of you can cite instances when you have been witness to what human beings are able to do to one another.

The anecdotal examples I am about to highlight demonstrate that, even though the range of experiences varies enormously from individual to individual I am sure we are all able to identify with the human responses we may have towards each situation.

#### **OHT 10: Unexpected Trauma material**

**“Not being given enough information or the wrong information prior to an assignment can make things extremely difficult. I went to a booking, which I believed was about someone being accused of murder. The appointment ended up actually being about the accidental death of a child. I was angry I had been given the wrong information, however I still did the best I could in the situation.”**

#### **OHT 11: Graphic Images**

**“I was once booked to interpret at a correctional facility and I was required to sign [interpret] an explicit discussion on rape. I thought I was coping well, however the man then said that he had raped his wife and as she had begun to enjoy it, he slit her throat. The way I had to sign this was very visual and when you interpret for someone you take on his or her emotions. I found this very confronting and talked to many people about it.”**

#### **OHT 12: Lack of Closure to Many Assignments**

**“If you have interpreted in a bad situation it is great to be able to interpret for that same person in a good situation. If I have interpreted a still birth and then been able to interpret the next birth, a much happier experience, it really helps me cope.”**

#### **OHT 13: Indications of ‘Survivor Guilt’**

**“In some situations you may want to be at a funeral yourself, however you have been asked to interpret. You always end up interpreting at that funeral because someone has to do it.”**

The research questions in the study centre on the impact that the interpreter’s legal work has on the individuals’ perception of oneself and one’s work. Two surveys were distributed seeking information about the interpreters’ professional background, the nature of the work they do, their feelings towards their clients, their working conditions and their perceived control over their work environment. These questions provided direction for the research and led into more personal questions in the second survey about the interpreters’ responses to their work environment, personal characteristics and self-care. The responses are linked to the most recent research and literature from the I/T field and the social service sector.

The negative effects of VT experienced by an individual may result in the following:

#### **OHT 14: Shift in Ones' Frame of Reference**

- **Questioning one's own spiritual beliefs**
- **Questioning the meaning of life, one's sense of identity**
- **Finding one's philosophy of life, principles and beliefs shattered.**

#### **OHT 15: Difficulty in Managing Self-Capacities**

- **Overwhelmed with self-criticism, anxiety, sorrow, anger or even rage.**
- **Activities that one previously enjoyed may now hold little attraction.**
- **The person may feel unloved and have difficulty in conveying or even receiving love or comfort from another person.**
- **Impairment of the capacity to maintain self-esteem.**

#### **OHT 16: Difficulty Managing Ego Resources.**

- **Impair one's ability to make self-protective judgements.**
- **Difficulty in establishing and maintaining boundaries.**
- **Impaired ability to be introspective.**
- **Difficulty in taking perspective, including empathy and sense of humour.**
- **Lack of awareness of one's psychological needs.**

The results of the study indicated that one third of the respondents were at extreme risk of being vicariously traumatised. (p 113)

While the study does not generalise the findings by arguing that the observations, perceptions and profiles of, in this instance, Auslan interpreters surveyed in the research represents *all* Auslan interpreters working in Australia, I recognise that the research could influence individuals, organisations and training institutions. It is my interpretation of the data and literature review that makes the connection between VT and interpreters. As a practitioner having had legal interpreting experience, it goes without saying that I have drawn from my own experience in helping me understand and draw conclusions from many of the responses.

As with any research I recognise there are always limitations. The first limitation is the size and location of the study. The study included surveys collected from 12 respondents, all interpreters currently working in a legal setting. The location of the sample was primarily limited to the eastern states making it difficult to include a national perspective. It must be pointed out that there are very few Auslan interpreters in Australia that possess NAATI Interpreter qualifications to enable them to work in a legal environment and some of these chose not to work in this field.

The second limitation is that the data collected is based on the respondents' *perception* and not an analysis of their practice and behaviours.

The third limitation is that the survey did not adequately determine the extent of exposure to VT.

The fourth limitation is that additional information was not sought from the Auslan interpreting profession as a whole to determine the extent to which they acknowledge, evaluate or even reject the existence of VT.

In conclusion, the negative effects of vicarious traumatisation do not have to be givens. They are manageable with proper support and training. Interpreters need the opportunity to process and explore their experiences. Do our training courses prepare the individual for the psychological experience of interpreting? Do we teach coping mechanisms and at the bare minimum make the new generation of IT professionals aware of VT and strategies, at a professional level, for self-care and support?

As practising professionals and IT academics, we have an obligation to prepare students for the work they will encounter that is not in the textbook. It is time to incorporate the hazards of our profession, VT, stress, and burnout into the curriculum. A training course is a protective environment in which students are able to openly discuss such issues, examine the symptoms and identify methods for avoiding such hazards. By providing education of the potential to be vicariously traumatised in the work that interpreters do, there will be a higher degree of awareness and preventative care to avoid its pervasive effects on professional and personal life.

It is important to acknowledge the need for debriefing and the establishment of a more formal peer support structure. There needs to be an investigation into various approaches to debriefing and peer support to determine the appropriateness of each method and its suitability to this profession. The significance of the non-evaluative role of the debriefer cannot continue to be ignored. Interpreters routinely require support and encouragement to free themselves to acknowledge their 'humanness'...to listen to their inner voice.

I hope my presentation this afternoon will be a springboard for further discussion of issues which have remained 'unheard' but which have important implications for not only our profession but also our communities, IT agencies and training institutions. Let us make a start at changing this culture of silence. Where better to start than with our own professional organisations.

I would like to take this opportunity to thank the Board of AUSIT for inviting me to present the Jill Blewett Memorial Lecture.