

# Registrants' Reflections: the real-life experiences of Public Service Interpreters

What better way to mark the 25th Anniversary of the founding of NRPSI than to hear from Registered Public Service Interpreters about the incredible work they do under often very challenging circumstances.

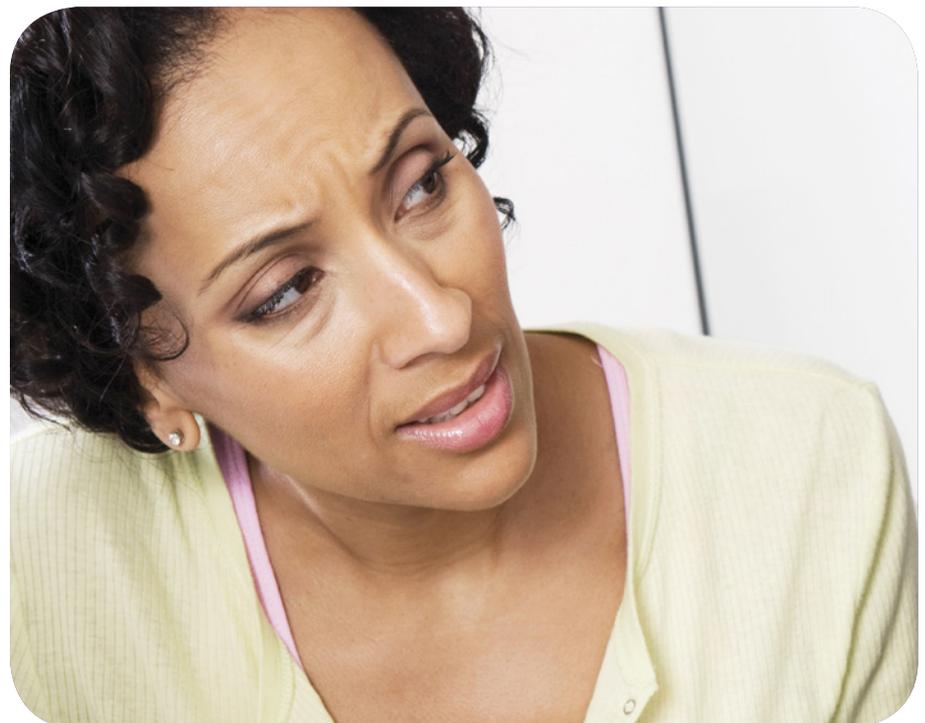
Some reflections have been provided anonymously in order to preserve confidentiality.

With many thanks to all those who have contributed.

Reflection 1:

## Registrant Sue Leschen's reflections

I've worked as an interpreter for nearly 20 years, almost exclusively in the legal field. I'm a lawyer, albeit no longer a practising one since I set up my company Avocate – Legal and Business French Interpreting and Translation services. So, I'm still working in my natural habitat, just in a different way. I am so fortunate to be able to make use of both my legal and language skills. I love working in the legal field. We PSIs [Public



Service Interpreters] see a side of life that most people not only never see but also couldn't even imagine. I feel very privileged to have a window into this other world. As a PSI I have worked on some amazing cases.

One of the most memorable of these cases involved a suspected terrorist. I and a colleague interpreter virtually lived at a

police station for 14 days while working on this case. I not only interpreted during the police interviews but also during the suspect's mealtimes and breaks. The early morning raid on his home by armed police was like something out of a James Bond film! While I always maintained my professionalism and impartiality during this assignment, I naturally felt a certain amount of prejudice

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towards the suspected terrorist at the beginning. After all, we've been wired to feel that way towards terrorist suspects. But, by the end of the assignment, my personal feelings were in turmoil as I had grown to quite like the detainee I had spent so many hours with. I felt very confused as to whether he was genuinely innocent, as he said he was, or whether he was a consummate actor. I will never know for sure, but in any case, my personal feelings were irrelevant and certainly not on display in any way during the assignment.



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Modern slavery is a hot topic at the moment and we PSIs are seeing more and more of these cases in the courts and immigration tribunals. I recently presented a legal terminology webinar on this subject on behalf of eCPD Webinars and recordings of it can be accessed via the eCPD website.

We PSIs certainly work on the frontline, which means that we get to hear some harrowing stories. For example, I once interpreted over several months for a young girl who had been trafficked into the UK by her own family and

forced into sex slavery. Working on this particular case traumatised me for some years. It was early on in my career and I didn't realise then that I could have withdrawn at any time from this assignment. Instead, I allowed myself to be repeatedly booked to work on this case. What is more, I would go straight from interpreting on this case to work on others, often without a break or being able to seek formal psychological support because no such support existed then for PSIs – and still doesn't. Interpreters, unlike other professionals working in the public services, such as the police, aren't provided with this type of help. The majority of PSIs are self-employed and so can't access in-house counselling services. We are also bound by the confidentiality requirements of our professional codes of conduct.

PSIs have various ways of coping with such pressures. Personally, I work and play hard and that works for me. Also, having done this job now for many years, I am much less phased by people – both clients and other professionals – if they are aggressive or generally difficult to work with. I now have the confidence to withdraw from an assignment if I deem it to be

necessary for any reason – for example, a client refuses to speak to me in French or at all, or a police officer refuses to allow me to take a break during a three-hour interview. Similarly, I have the confidence to ask questions, seek clarification and ensure others understand what my role is as an interpreter.

I love working as a freelance interpreter and being my own boss. In fact, I would never want to work for anyone else again. Every day is different and brings new challenges and insights. It is an amazing job!

### Reflection 2:

#### **The voice of a Public Service Interpreter**

I remember working on a case involving domestic violence and the adoption of a newly-born baby that resulted from this. I was the interpreter for the mother and all other parties involved in the case: the police, social workers, family workers, child guardian, psychologist, solicitor and barrister.

The first day I was called in the police were there. The mother had committed a violent act at home with her baby in the room. The case was very long, lasting about a year, and I was involved in interpreting sessions virtually every other day until its completion. Indeed, I was involved in every aspect of the case.

The mother was a difficult person. She had alienated other interpreters by claiming that she didn't understand what they were saying or rather interpreting when the truth of the matter is that she didn't like what she was hearing. When she did this with me, I would just keep going with interpreting exactly what was being said. I

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came to understand her quickly and knew how she was going to behave. I explained to her at the outset that as a professional interpreter I have to interpret everything that is said by all parties involved and must remain neutral. I was sympathetic to her situation and life but maintained a professional distance at all times. It is vital to do this, particularly in cases involving multiple family members because they often each have different ideas on how something should be interpreted.

In this particular case, I would arrive earlier than the start time of any given assignment and stay

after it had ended, and I made other professionals involved in the case aware that I would do this to ensure the woman could not approach me outside of the professional space we shared. She became quite fond of me and wanted us to see each other in a different situation, but I said that we couldn't as this would compromise my impartiality.

The work of a Public Service Interpreter is challenging. We not only have to interpret exactly what is said but also every hesitation and repetition to allow the other party to make his or her own judgement regarding

their meaning. We work in very emotionally-charged situations. You would need to be made of stone not to feel the emotional burden of it. You won't find a Public Service Interpreter who hasn't had the experience of a client sobbing in their arms.

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So why do I work as an interpreter? Because you get to help people. You provide them with a voice. There are many court judges who say you are the most important person involved in a trial because you help the defendant to understand what is going on.

**Reflection 3:**

**Interpreting for a quarter of a century**

I got into interpreting having visited my local college to look for an interpreting course. I found a course advertised on the college noticeboard, which led me to track down and speak with the course tutor. Originally, the course didn't provide the option of doing an exam. But then another student joined the course who, like me, wanted to study for a qualification and so we were given the opportunity. The only

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problem was that I wanted to do the healthcare version of the Diploma in Public Service Interpreting [DPSI] and the other student wanted to do the law version. Consequently, to begin with, we alternated between studying both pathways. We also didn't have a bilingual lecturer for the entire course, which was a bit of a problem. We only gained access to one halfway through our studies and even then we only had them for one session per month. As a result, we had to be really self-motivated and undertake a lot of self-directed learning. Even so, I obtained my DPSI in healthcare. Then, in the mid-90s, I became the tutor of the course that I had taken and went on to obtain the DPSI in law. I also did a counselling course around this time.

It wasn't until the late 90s that I began working as an interpreter. It was about this time that my language skills were really in demand and I both taught interpreting and worked as an interpreter. I stopped teaching about five years later when the demand for my language declined. I really enjoyed working as a teacher and had a good track record in helping students to pass their DPSI exam.

When I first started practising as an interpreter I worked with a firm of solicitors. I then went on to work with a variety of public services and public service professionals. I've worked with hospitals, doctors, social workers, etc. And I've worked all over the country, wherever I have been needed.

I remember working on a murder case. This was a particularly memorable assignment. The police called to see if I was available to work on the case immediately. I said I could only come immediately if they could pick me up because I don't have my own transport. They



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called back a short while after this first call to tell me that what had been a stabbing incident had turned into a murder case, that they needed me and would pick me up. I went to a hotel to carry out the police interview. Then, the next day, I had to go to the police station to transcribe the suspect's statement into English. The reason that I remember this particular assignment is because three of my students were involved in interviewing witnesses as well. This gave me a real sense of pride and satisfaction.

Every day is different in this job. That is why this job is so fascinating. I would get bored with doing the same thing every day. If there is no challenge, for me there is no job!

Unfortunately, not everyone understands what we do as interpreters. I think explaining what we are there to do is a must. You can otherwise be treated like a robot and have people talk at you from the outset. People will often also speak too fast, which makes your life difficult. Simultaneous interpreting isn't easy. You don't have a dictionary in front of you and you have to find just the right word to use each and every time.

Sadly, we don't receive a just reward or the right amount of recognition for our professional skills. Our pay really doesn't reflect what we do. I hope, though, that one day the profession will be fully regulated, and that people will have to use Registered Interpreters and pay them better.

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### Reflection 4:

#### **A personal account of the valuable role that Public Service Interpreters play**

I've been working as an interpreter for almost three decades, since before the National Register was founded. Indeed, I have been interpreting for most of my life and have seen the profession undergo a great many changes.

The role of the interpreter is often misunderstood, which is sometimes reflected in how you are treated. For instance, the police can expect you to write down the interview that you are interpreting when this isn't your responsibility. What's more, people you are interpreting for can become very attached to you because they see you as a gateway to what they need. This is a very normal, human reaction given that they don't speak English and find themselves in completely unfamiliar situations.

I tell the people that I work with to imagine that I am a machine in order to maintain a professional distance. As such, I can't give them any advice. I can only interpret exactly what they say to me.

I worked with solicitors who handled asylum cases when I first started practising as an interpreter in the early 90s. I then went on to work with a variety of public services before concentrating on working with the Home Office and asylum seekers.

I have worked on a great many difficult cases with the Home Office. I have always maintained a high level of professionalism and my impartiality while undertaking assignments, but this hasn't always been easy. I have witnessed cultural clashes during assignments that I have felt it necessary to address. These are very important conversations to have, as such clashes can lead to misconceptions and the wrong actions being taken.

The job of an interpreter is a very difficult one and you can feel that you are undervalued, particularly when unskilled individuals are allowed to operate in your field and can do so for lower rates of pay. This is disappointing and disheartening. However, I love to help people and professional interpreters do just this. While I still choose to work as an interpreter,

I now only work with people who value my work, expertise, experience and professionalism – and will pay me what this is worth.

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**“Our profession is so very valuable. It really can mean the difference between life and death to people.”**

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I was recently contacted by a language agency who came to me after three or four other interpreters, in turn, had cancelled on them. The assignment they contacted me about involved a heavily pregnant lady who was in danger of having her baby taken away. I was brought in to interpret during a psychological test to assess the cognitive capabilities of the mother-to-be. Aided by my professional interpreting skills, the psychologist found the woman to be mentally fit. What was alarming was that other interpreters who had been involved earlier in the case had inaccurately reported things that had been said. This resulted in the mother almost having her baby taken from her.

Our profession is so very valuable. It really can mean the difference between life and death to people. You only need to think of those asylum seekers who face being sent back to a country where they might be tortured or imprisoned if they are not given access to a professional linguist who can accurately interpret what they say. ■

