

Lost in Translation? Found in ESP!

Medical English Making Strides in Okinawa

The Okinawa Prefecture government has a long-range plan to make the prefecture a center for medical tourism, somewhat along the lines of what has been successfully established in Thailand. In order for Okinawa's dream to become a reality, the doctors, nurses, medical technicians and other hospital staff members in the prefecture's major hospitals need to develop at least a basic level of communicative competence in English. In conjunction with English language skills, the hospital staff members must develop some awareness of differences in nonverbal communication such as gestures and facial expressions, etc., as well as a degree of cross-cultural sensitivity. The Okinawa Prefecture Northern Area Hospitals have taken the lead in this venture.

In 2012, the Okinawa Prefecture Northern Area Hospitals made the bold move of beginning negotiations with this presenter regarding the establishment of an EMP (English for Medical Purposes), Medical English Education Program; the first of its kind in Okinawa. The presenter agreed to work on establishing the program following retirement (March 31st, 2014) from the university where the presenter had created and developed its English language program.

April 1st, 2014 marked the actual beginning of the EMP program, which is based at Hokubu Hospital in Nago, Okinawa. Initial steps included the administration and evaluation of detailed needs assessment for all the hospital staff (doctors, nurses, technicians, aides, et al.) relevant to their departments and fields of specialization. There has followed intensive research, review and evaluation of existing EMP materials currently available in order to utilize relevant materials most suitable for the needs and English language communicative skill levels of the many participants. The presenter has also been developing many additional materials which better suit the needs and skill levels of the participants than the existing materials.

In the ensuing months, the program and its offerings have been undergoing many transformations in order to meet the needs and levels of the various medical staff members as they change. To meet these changing needs, the presenter has been doing ongoing, in depth reevaluation of existing EMP materials currently available and has been developing additional new materials which are suited to the changing needs and gradually improving skill levels of the participants.

The primary goal of this first Medical English Education Program in Okinawa is, as previously suggested, to enable all hospital staff to develop English language communicative skills necessary in Okinawa for successful, comfortable interaction between non-Japanese-speaking patients (who nearly always know English as a first or second language) and Japanese-speaking medical staff. If Okinawa is to become a prefecture specializing in medical tourism, the hospitals can no longer rely on the periodic hiring of interpreters and translators, who often lack the necessary medical knowledge to adequately serve the needs of the patients and medical staff. Indeed, if this medical venture is to be realized it will become not only impractical but also virtually impossible to simply rely on the periodic hiring of interpreters and translators. The Okinawa Prefecture Northern Area Hospitals, with this pilot program, is leading the vanguard in EMP in Okinawa. Currently based at Hokubu Hospital in Nago, other area hospitals in the northern and central areas of Okinawa are already taking note and requesting special classes and tutorials for their staff. As a result, the presenter is beginning to try to recruit and train additional EMP educators.

The existing program includes ongoing weekly classes for the pediatricians, the A&E/E.R. nursing staff, the hemodialysis technicians and nursing staff (Hokubu Hospital has the largest hemodialysis center, which was also the first one established in the prefecture) and the ward nurses and aides. Additionally, the presenter holds individual tutorials with several physicians (surgeons, cardiologists, dermatologists, orthopedists, specialists in infectious diseases, et al.) and nurses, nurses aides and technicians. Some office staff who deal with patients (registering, billing, etc.) are beginning to trickle in, too, for basic Q&A practice during Office Hours (scheduled as "English Café").

The classes incorporate several activities according to areas of specialization and include role plays, dialogue and conversation practice, presentations of case studies and research (with and without power point), reading comprehension (texts, case studies, medical journals in print and on line, etc.) and even relevant word searches and crossword puzzles. The individual tutorials vary. Often they are to review case studies together or prepare, revise and practice oral and power point presentations for international conferences. Some doctors are preparing for the USMLE Step 1 and 2CS test (one is in Tokyo this weekend for the USMLE Step 1 test on February 15th, 2015!). Many of the doctors, nurses and aides also stop by periodically during Office Hours/English Café simply to practice conversation to improve their fluency and raise their confidence...and enjoy "a nice cuppa"!

Accompanying this poster presentation you can see several photos of participants, classes, tutorials as well as examples of the materials currently being employed in the Okinawa Prefecture Northern Area Hospitals Medical English Education Program. Should you have any questions or wish to discuss EMP with the presenter, please feel free to use the contact information below.

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