Famous Firsts by Asian Americans

From politicians to professional athletes

Government:
- **U.S. representative:** Dalip Singh Saund, 1956, representative from California. The first female Asian American elected to Congress was Patsy Takemoto Mink, elected in 1964 as a representative from Hawaii.
- **U.S. senator:** Hiram Fong, 1959, one of Hawaii’s first two senators.
- **Federal court judge:** Herbert Choy, 1971, appointed to the U.S. court of appeals for the ninth circuit.
- **U.S. ambassador:** Julia Chang Bloch, 1989, appointed ambassador to the Kingdom of Nepal.
- **State legislator:** Wing F. Ong, 1946, elected to the Arizona House of Representatives.
- **Governor:** George R. Ariyoshi, 1974, governor of Hawaii. The first on the mainland was Gary Locke, elected governor of Washington in 1996.
- **Mayor of a major U.S. city:** Norman Yoshio Mineta, 1971, in San Jose, California.
- **Member of presidential cabinet:** Norman Yoshio Mineta, 2000, appointed secretary of commerce. In 2001, he became the first cabinet member to switch directly from a Democratic to Republican cabinet—becoming secretary of transportation—and the only Democrat in George W. Bush’s cabinet. The first female Asian-American cabinet member was Elaine Chao, appointed secretary of labor in 2001.
- **Vietnamese-American member of Congress:** Anh Cao won a special election for a seat in the House of Representatives, representing New Orleans, Louisiana, in December 2008.

Aviation:
- **Female aviator:** Katherine Sui Fun Cheung, licensed in 1932.

Science and Medicine:
- **Isolated epinephrine (adrenaline) from the suprarenal gland:** Jokichi Takamine, 1901.
- **Invented pulse transfer controlling device leading to magnetic core memory:** An Wang, 1949.
- **Cloned the AIDS virus:** Flossie Wong-Staal, 1984.

Film & Television:
- **Movie star:** Anna May Wong, who starred in the 1921 film *Bits of Life* and many other movies.
- **Academy Award winner:** Haing Ngor, Best Supporting Actor of 1984 for his role in *The Killing Fields*
- **Host of own network TV series:** Anna May Wong, 1951, *The Gallery of Madame Liu Tsong*
- **Star of own network sitcom:** Pat Morita, 1976, *Mr. T and Tina*

News Reporting:
- **First network news reporters:** Ken Kashiwahara and Connie Chung, 1974. In 1993, Chung became the first Asian American to be a nightly news anchor for a major network (CBS).
- **First anchor of a national radio program:** Emil Guillermo, 1989, host of NPR’s *All Things Considered*.

Other:
- **First to command a combat battalion:** Young Oak Kim, of the 100th Infantry Battalion, 1943.
- **First selected in the first round of NFL draft:** Eugene Chung, 1992, selected by New England.

Source: http://www.infoplease.com/spot/apahmfirsts.html
If you’ve heard it once, you’ve heard it a million times: interpreters maintain confidentiality at all times. It is one of the hallmarks of a professional interpreter and one of the most important keys to establishing our credibility with both providers and patients. We sign confidentiality agreements with hospitals. We assure patients in the pre-session that we will keep all information secret. We destroy interpreting notes to safeguard confidentiality.

But have you ever wondered if you, the hospital and the patient all understand the same thing when you promise to “treat as confidential…all information learned in the performance of (your) professional duties”? A quick survey of professional medical interpreters suggests that we all may not share the same definition of this key concept.

This should not surprise us. As you know, culture impacts how we interpret and interact with the world. It is not strange, then, that people from different cultures should interpret a sensitive word like “confidential” in different ways. Let’s look at some of those distinctions.

Here’s how the Merriam-Webster dictionary defines “confidential:”

1. Marked by intimacy or willingness to confide, “a confidential tone”
2. Private, secret “confidential information”
3. Entrusted with confidences, “confidential clerk”
4. Containing information whose unauthorized disclosure could be prejudicial to the national interest – compare secret, top secret

In the dominant culture in this country, “confidential” is generally understood to mean “secret”. When a friend tells you something “in confidence,” she is expecting that you won’t tell anyone. Period. We often think of confidential as being like the status of confession to a priest, which he may not divulge to anyone under any circumstances at all.

Medical culture, on the other hand, has a slightly different understanding of “confidential.” Personal information is kept confidential in that only the people who need to know that information are party to it. However that can include everyone from the receptionist to the medical assistant to the nurse to the doctor to the phlebotomist to the interpreter to the billing clerk. Sometimes it can seem that your secret is not much of a secret in a healthcare institution.

For interpreters, the meaning of “confidential” has changed over the past decade. It used to mean “secret” – sort of. Professional spoken-language interpreters did not repeat what they had heard in interpreted sessions, except in cases of mandated reporting or for educational purposes (without revealing identifiers). The Code of Ethics of the Registry of Interpreters for the Deaf used to be so strict on this issue that it didn’t allow interpreters to tell anyone that they were even going to an interpreting assignment. Now, however, the revised RID Code is more realistic, focusing on prohibiting gossip instead of constituting a gag order. And the National Code of Ethics for Interpreters in Health Care, published by the National Council on Interpreting in Health Care, has adopted the meaning of “confidentiality” prevalent in health care in general and described above.

How do LEP patients understand “confidentiality?” That depends, of course, on both the patient’s cultural roots and the patient’s personal culture. But here are some suggestions shared by working interpreters on the listserv of the National Council on Interpreting in Health Care, of the different ways in which they have seen this word applied.

One Russian-English interpreter writes that she has noticed, and confirmed with recently immigrated Russian physicians, that her patients understand “confidentiality” to mean that sensitive information is never divulged to the patient nor to anyone untrustworthy enough to tell the patient. The patient must be protected from bad news. Clearly this differs significantly from what US health systems have in mind.

Another Russian-English interpreter reports that her Russian colleagues and family understand “confidentiality” as does the dominant culture here. She mentions that other Russians, though, commonly understand that all “confidential” information will be passed as a matter of course to the patient’s close family. In this country, that would be considered a clear breach of confidentiality.

Maria Carr, a Spanish-English interpreter, writes that after years of medical interpreting, she has come to the conclusion that the concept of confidentiality as it is used in the US healthcare system does not exist for many Spanish-speaking patients. Assurances that information will be kept confidential are met with blank stares and confused looks. The word “confidential” must be explained. She goes on to explain why she thinks this may be so: “My personal experience growing up in a Mexican culture at home taught me that families, neighbors, friends and even acquaintances have a genuine interest in and concern for each other. Therefore, any time someone is hurt, sick, having a baby, lost a loved one, etc., they are surrounded by a group of concerned and loving people from all those groups. The idea of showing support for each other also seems to be closely related to the idea of respect.

- To be continued in the next issue -