

Out on Our Own

SECTION EDITORS



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Editorial

Greetings, readers. As I write this, the EMWA spring conference is on the horizon and I hope I will have met as many of you as possible at the Freelance Business Forum in Birmingham. In this edition of the *OOOO* you will find two interesting articles – one which deals with expanding our scope as communicators of medical science to patient education, and the other a story of a newbie freelancer setting up his business in South America.

The EMWA community is truly pan-national and I find it interesting to read stories of our members on how they came into the medical writing profession, sometimes moving across not just nations but also continents. It is also encouraging to note that medical writing as a profession is fast becoming a first-choice

option for a number of academic researchers following their graduate studies. However, to do all this as a freelancer is indeed a feat requiring courage, fortitude, and steadfastness. In his story, Ricardo Wilches gives us his narrative on choosing to be a science communicator following his stint in academia and starting his own freelance consultancy in Colombia after having spent a number of years in Germany.

In recent years, a substantial amount of weightage has been given to patient engagement and involvement in the process of clinical research, especially from a regulatory standpoint. In this regard, the role of a medical writer becomes paramount in successfully conveying the science to the final consumers of the medical research process – the patient, in a language that is devoid of unnecessary technical jargon and

easy to understand. While this can be quite daunting, the ultimate benefit is a well-informed patient who can make educated decisions and participate actively in the research process. In her article, Elisa Sala writes about the various avenues through which freelance medical writers can contribute to patient education and her personal experience with it.

I hope you find these articles instructive and an enjoyable read. Please continue to send in your contributions to and suggestions for the *OOOO* so that we may share these with other readers. Last, but not least, my personal thanks to Elisa and Ricardo for their educative and inspiring articles, and to Paul Wafula for helping with editing these.

Satyen Shenoy

Becoming a science communicator – in my own words

For a life scientist, the decision to move from academia to industry or public service may be regarded as a safe move in terms of financial stability and a built-in pipeline to career growth. However, for those who embark on the freelance pathway, the call for having control of their own destiny and to create their niche in society is possibly the main driving force. It is a choice that entails a great deal of risk, yet it may also lead to success, entrepreneurship, and innovation. My personal conviction is that, it is possible to build a successful career as a freelance medical writer and scientific communicator. The determining factors for this success are passion for what one does, a vision, useful habits, endless joy at learning, ability to build and work in teams, and a desire to push oneself into exploring uncharted territories.

Finding the path

Realising that my period in academia only meant the beginning of a bigger adventure was a slow process and it implied discovering my call and professional purpose. As I progressed through my education and training as a researcher, I enjoyed every step along the process of generating new knowledge; from designing and conducting experiments, analysing data, to writing up and communicating my results.

I learnt the value of planning, persistence, and of cultivating good relations with fellow scientists, especially with my supervisor. However, these were not the only attitudes and skills that were instrumental to completing my doctoral studies.

Since my childhood, I have always enjoyed scribbling, sketching, and drawing – I grew up surrounded by people with a sensitivity for art and handicraft. Therefore, communication through drawings and sketches has always come naturally to me, and having a visual approach to understanding concepts and ideas has been central to learning science and communicating it to my peers. Furthermore, the activities that I best enjoyed during my graduate school, in Munich, included preparations for meetings or teaching activities, giving talks, and drawing on the board to illustrate concepts of processes in genetics and evolutionary biology – my fields of expertise. In the years as a doctoral student, I very often found myself organising scientific meetings and seminars at my institute.

After my 1 year as a post-doc working on quantitative genetics in southwestern Germany, it became clear to me that my career would focus on helping others to communicate and transfer knowledge. The next step was to initiate the process to make that vision I had created of myself come true.

The first steps to re-inventing myself as a science communicator were to understand what job offers were available outside academia, to identify what roles fit my profile, what my strengths and weaknesses were, and to move to Berlin – I have always wanted to experience living there. I addressed the first two tasks through re-connecting with former graduate school colleagues who were working in pharmaceutical and biotechnology companies. I inquired about their transition experience and the positive and not-so-positive sides of their current positions. This allowed me to gather information to help me formulate my goal. In addition, I started to reach out to medical and scientific communicators via LinkedIn. Thanks to this I encountered, for the first time, the term “medical writer”.

Approaching medical writers was fun; they were easy to approach and happy to share their experiences and offer advice. Almost all the writers I got in touch with advised me to join EMWA through which I could meet writers with different levels of expertise and identify opportunities. Additionally, I could attend foundation courses at EMWA conferences to gather the knowledge and skills in the art of medical writing and science communication. Eventually, I joined EMWA, and next I found

myself back in good old Munich in May 2016, listening to talks about medical writing, participating in foundation workshops, and talking to scientists during coffee and lunch breaks about their previous research and how happy they are now in their many roles related to medical writing. Attending Munich's EMWA meeting also allowed me to meet with industry representatives. All in all, I left the venue filled with optimism, convinced of the importance of networking, and focusing on a new task – creating a niche for myself. Back in Berlin, I got in touch with leading members of EMWA's freelance group Berlin-Brandenburg. I participated in their informal gatherings and was fortunate to receive advice and mentorship from senior freelance writers in my area.

In addition, I started to work on my writing skills, chiefly in English, as well as participating in webinars at the EMWA website, and using online resources at Coursera. I decided to focus on the following topics: clinical research, epidemiology, public health, drug development and commercialization, and cancer. And as I worked on building my skills and approached industry from different fronts, the idea of pioneering as a medical writer in my country of origin, Colombia, started to cross my mind. My dream is to live on both continents, but to get to that point I felt it was necessary to create amenable conditions in one location. So, after long pondering over the pros and cons, I decided to continue this adventure in Colombia. In January 2017, I was commencing a new year in Bogota; the city where I was born and the vibrant capital of Colombia.

Advantages and disadvantages are context-dependent

Heading back to my country after having spent almost 10 years in Germany, meant being back with a suitcase full of good credentials, skills, and a lot of uncertainty. I came back with a good deal of international experience and habits, such as being punctual, that could or could not come in handy in the new business venue. Interestingly, one feels a little out-of-place after such a long stay abroad; fortunately, I can speak the local language “like a local”. At first, words would not come easily but it is only a matter of practice. I think several EMWA members can relate to this.

Besides powerful personal reasons, I chose to move back to Colombia because of the consolidating presence of global pharmaceutical and biotechnology companies; implying that organisations such as CROs were also on demand with concomitant new opportunities for

projects. Soon I realised that I was terribly optimistic and unprepared to seize my chances. After my long absence from the country, I identified two threats to my plan: firstly, I knew very little about Colombia's health system and policy, and second, I had to face a long tradition of only crediting physicians for pharma and clinical research jobs. The latter is understandable, since a workforce holding doctoral degrees in life sciences is of a very rare kind in Colombia. I was not disheartened by this reality. Instead, I saw opportunities and decided to make use of my strengths: solid research background, bilingual communication skills, determination, and my fast learning abilities. I knew the game had other stakeholders to whom my services would be useful.

So, I set to explore the market better and to identify the possible niches in which a scientific communicator could be of good use. Besides public organisations (policy makers and regulatory authorities), academia, health care providers, and, very importantly, the patients (patient associations), and healthy population. All these stakeholders do have the need to communicate with one another.

The messenger's mission

Once you identify who you can write for and on whose behalf, it all boils down to adapting one stakeholder's message to ensure that target audiences will get it right. Clarity is always paramount regardless of who your target stakeholder is. In addition, if you are targeting messages to payers, medical bodies or regulatory authorities, then you should master the techniques of structuring information in the right way, but, if you are assisting the delivery of messages to patients or the general population, creativity will be your best ally.

This realisation and a doubled-up networking effort landed me to my first professional role as scientific communicator and medical writer in



Bogota. I am currently providing services for a consultancy in the development of an exciting project on knowledge transfer framed within paving the way to personalised medicine.

I would like to see myself as a pioneer and as someone who looks for challenges and opportunities. When I joined EMWA, I was probably the first Colombian to do so, and now, in Colombia, I may be one of the few scientists who goes around advocating for EMWA and sharing ideas about medical writing and the importance of scientific communication. Although there are already hundreds of professionals who are currently doing medical writing and who chiefly come from the medical field and those who do scientific journalism, many of them are unaware of the tremendous scope of our chosen profession. Our contribution as scientists and communicators can be of benefit to the development of a country like Colombia and Latin America as a whole.

I am happy that I found in my new EMWA friends in Europe and South America, a guiding hand and moral support to redirect my path as a scientist towards medical and scientific writing. I look forward to maintaining my contribution to the association and through their support, embark on creating new bonds between medical writers in Latin America, Europe, and the world at large.

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Writing for patients – plenty of opportunities for freelance medical writers

Writing for patients is a novel challenge for freelance medical writers, not only for those who specialise in regulatory writing but also for those who work in medical communications. It offers plenty of opportunities to improve communication skills, expand scientific background, be engaged in medical and social initiatives, create novel and more personalised networks, and last but not least often write in one's own native language. Freelance professionals are flexible, easy to contact, and free – sometimes – to accomplish projects for intellectual pleasure or scientific curiosity; therefore, they represent the ideal candidates to collaborate with patients' associations.

Since the first European Medicines Agency (EMA) workshop on clinical trial transparency, held in 2012, patients' associations have also been identified as stakeholders, together with academics, industry representatives, editors, and lawyers, to set the milestones for EMA initiatives towards transparency. Patients' engagement and a novel patient-centred attitude has led the EMA to increase the ethical responsibility towards these principal players in clinical trials, by introducing the layperson's summary in the Market Access Authorisation procedure.

The lay-person summary is a regulatory document that summarizes the main results of a trial in an understandable and accurate manner. The debate about its structure and content is still ongoing and sharing medical writers' experiences on writing this document would be of outstanding importance to improve its quality in the future. Basically, to write a layperson's summary, a perfect knowledge of clinical trial and the ability to summarise and highlight the most important information and communicate them in a clear, concise, and appropriate way are required.

Another document specifically addressed to patients is the informed consent. At the 4th EMWA Symposium held during the spring conference in Munich last year, Jan Geissler – Director, European Patients' Academy on Therapeutic Innovation – proposed a novel version for the informed consent, structured and written with patients in mind. The document has a clear structure in which trial-related information, organisational information and consent and data confidentiality are well classified; the readability is improved by using short sentences, figurative and lay language, and explanatory schemes and pictures. The TIGER Study¹ on chronic myeloid leukaemia has already used this

patient information consent in more than one hundred trial centres in Germany.

Both lay-person's summary and the informed consent must be patient-centred to be effective and valuable; a professional medical writer should modify his/her style and language to meet and inform the patient, and this may present a very big challenge!

The involvement in patients' association initiatives, such as awareness campaigns, website updates, and scientific meetings, may be also of interest to medical writers. I was personally called to collaborate with five patients' associations involved with rare diseases which started an awareness campaign on the use of sunscreen products. We were committed to identifying the scientific rationale that justifies the mandatory use of sunscreen in each of these rare diseases and bring it to the attention of the *Ministero della Salute* – the Italian Ministry of Health. It was an inspiring and enriching experience in all aspects: I found expertise, high commitment to achieve the final goal, and professional friendship that helped me improve as a medical writer and woman.

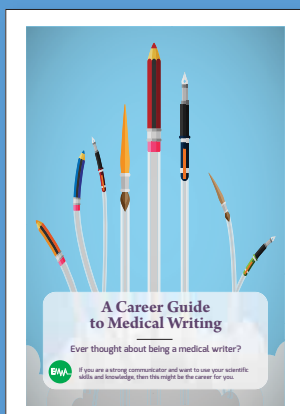
I strongly recommend exploring the world of patients' associations and looking at writing for patients as a great opportunity to grow.

References

1. ClinicalTrials.gov. Tasigna and interferon alpha evaluation initiated by the German Chronic Myeloid Leukemia Study Group – the TIGER Study (TIGER). 2017 [cited 24 Apr 2017] Available from: <https://clinicaltrials.gov/ct2/show/NCT01657604>.

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EMWA's New Medical Writing Career Guide is now available!

Included in the guide:

- What is medical writing
- The different types of medical writing
- The skills and qualifications needed to be a medical writer
- Where medical writers work and what they do
- How to get started
- How much to expect to get paid
- Career prospects for medical writers