

EMWA History

Thirty years on: In at the beginning

I left academia in 1992 to join a medical communications company, and once I had found my feet, I felt it appropriate to find a professional association. I found the American Medical Writers Association, which had what it listed as a European Chapter. I joined. This soon launched as a separate entity – the European Medical Writers Association (see Geoff Hall’s account of the early history of EMWA at: <https://www.emwa.org/about-us/about-emwa/history-of-emwa-1992-2008/>). So, in a sense, I was a founding member of our organisation. But my company wasn’t prepared to fund my attendance at conferences – and my professional life was pretty hectic and didn’t leave much time for them anyway. I had to be content with just reading the newsletter. In 2001, I managed to find time (and the funds) to attend the Montpellier, France, conference. Wow! What a blast! Everyone was so helpful and friendly.

This positive experience prompted me to offer my services as a workshop leader and over the next few years, I developed and delivered workshops, and, until COVID-19 spoiled things, I had run at least one workshop at almost all of the conferences since Montpellier.

Highlights? Well, the general ambience of conferences – everyone is approachable and keen to give advice, no matter how senior in the organisation. In those early days the conferences were small enough that you could always find whoever you wanted to meet by visiting the bar. And there was always a little crowd in the bar in the evenings surrounding a jolly, white-whiskered man with a happy, ruddy face – all laughing and generally enjoying life. This was Geoff Hall. We were much of an age and became instant friends. I don’t know how it started, but on the coach to the Conference Dinner, Geoff and I started singing *Clementine* to the tune of the Welsh hymn *Cym Rhondda* (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cwm_Rhondda). This became something of a tradition. The Association owes much to Geoff and I miss him – he died too soon.

The conference dinners were, to me, a highly enjoyable and valuable experience. OK, it was an excuse for a bit of a booze-up, but they allowed new members to see the “establishment” as they really were. I like to think of the Conference Dinner as a genuine symposium (*Greek: sun – with, together; potes – drinker*). And we ate in



Sharing reminiscences at the EMWA conference in Berlin, May 2022

some remarkable places, sampled a variety of local cuisines and local entertainment. For example, I’ll never forget the opportunity to play an alpenhorn duet with Adam Jacobs in Basel, Switzerland.

By 2002 I had much more freedom – I was now freelancing and the children were independent – so my wife, Jane, began joining us at conferences in a social capacity. Members may remember the VW van that we drove to several conferences, camping in it on the way there and back. The first trip in the van was to Barcelona, where we parked outside the hotel between two very expensive-looking Ferraris – this was the day after the Spanish Formula 1 Grand Prix. The longest trip we made from England was to Ljubljana. The drive to Lisbon was interesting, to say the least. Sat-nav took us to what it said was our destination in Lisbon. We were on a busy, one-way street, but couldn’t see the hotel. We went round the block several times, and still couldn’t find it. Eventually, we parked on a back street and asked a local. He said we should follow him, and sure enough, he took us to the same location on that busy one-way street, then pointed behind us. There was the hotel. We had missed it several times, because the signs all pointed the wrong way down the one-way street!

How has the Association changed over 30 years? Well, the biggest change has been in membership numbers. This is a good thing in many ways, but a small downside is that conferences have lost a little of the family feeling

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of when we were smaller. On the other hand, conferences are still friendly gatherings – nothing too formal and members only too happy to share their experiences. I always look forward to meeting members that I first met at the first few conferences; all of us older and perhaps wiser now, but I also enjoy chatting to new members whenever I get the chance.

What about the next 30 years? Well, you’ll have to bumble along without me, I’m sure, but judging from what I’ve seen over the last 30 years, new members will continue to volunteer to steer the association and continue the valuable training that we provide. No doubt conferences will be different, and I imagine that more of the training will be delivered remotely. I hope, however, that there will always be a place for real, in-person meetings – it would be a shame if we tried to hold all our symposia (see above) by Zoom! There will always be a need for people to make information about drugs, medicines, and devices accessible, clear, unbiased, and understandable. That’s what we medical writers do and will continue to do. And we will continue to need a professional body to represent us.



John, a glider pilot, takes 5