

# Veterinary Medical Writing

SECTION EDITOR



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## Editorial

This edition of Veterinary Medical Writing is a bit of a departure from the usual format. I have invited Caroline Frith, veterinary surgeon, amateur athlete, and good friend from vet school, to share extracts from her blog “Here We Go Again”. Here, she details her experiences as a patient undergoing treatment for stage 4 breast cancer and the impact it has had on her and her family. Why did I ask Caroline if she would like to share excerpts with a medical writing audience? Firstly, because I think you will agree, the prose is beautifully written and an excellent example of the genre of patient testimonial, containing rare insights provided by Caroline’s

veterinary medical training. Secondly, it is an opportunity to be reminded that whatever domain you work in, be it regulatory writing, medical communications, medical education or beyond, ultimately, it is all about the patient, and each patient is a unique individual. This is something that is easily forgotten in the discourse of population means, statistical significance, and power calculations. And if you are wondering why the title seems familiar, it is inspired by one of Caroline’s favourite music tracks: *Everybody’s Free (To Wear Sunscreen)* by Baz Luhrmann, itself a paragon of reflective thinking. This is probably also the first time that a veterinary *Medical*

*Writing* article comes with a content warning, or “steer clear”, as Caro says, as it does cover challenging topics, including living with incurable disease, descriptions of medical interventions, and the ultimate taboo, death. On the other hand, if an audience of medical writers can’t engage with these themes, who can?

In this edition of *From the Horses’ Mouth*, we have good news in the global fight against rabies, a spotlight on a study that challenges preconceptions about inbreeding (or feline blood bank), and some new evidence in the controversial issue of feeding cats a vegan diet.

Louisa

## Trust me on the sunscreen

### Caroline Frith

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**Editor’s note** - Caroline Frith graduated from Glasgow Veterinary School, UK, in 2000 and had settled into a busy career as a small animal veterinarian when she was diagnosed with primary breast cancer in 2014. She went into remission after treatment, but unfortunately, in February 2022, the cancer returned and is now incurable. Caroline started a blog documenting her experiences of the countless interventions and treatments she had received. Whilst undergoing treatment, Caroline has completed Ride London, the London Marathon, and Swim Serpentine, and in doing so, she not only completed the gruelling London Classics challenge, but also raised a phenomenal sum for Maggie’s - a charitable organisation providing emotional and practical support to patients with cancer across a network of centres in the UK, Barcelona, Hong Kong and Tokyo. Caroline lives in London with her husband, Ian, and their two children, Matilda and Eric.

### Just keep on running (February 13, 2022)

I hope this isn’t depressing, either for me or you – that is not my aim. Being diagnosed with a life-threatening illness definitely makes you do a lot of soul-searching and evaluate the important things in life. However, I will admit the past couple of years have been really hard, and if I have regrets, I’d say I have sweated the small stuff more than is good for me, mostly about work. So, if you can forgive my self-indulgence, then join me on the cancer rollercoaster – most of you will be lucky enough to just be spectators, but some of you are already riding alongside me, and as you have probably realised, once you’re strapped in you can never get off.

Hold on – it’s going to be a bumpy ride.

### Protocols (April 1, 2022)

Medicine is not straightforward. It’s not like taking your car to a garage, the mechanics plugging it into a computer, running some diagnostics, coming up with an answer, and fixing it. Some things in medicine are less complicated than others, and often, there are protocols in place which are evidence-based, tried and tested.

This time, I have a locoregional recurrence, and it is unusual in that it appears to be solely confined to one lymph node in my neck. Whilst I am aware that everything I read on Google needs to be taken with a pinch of salt, one thing I know for certain is that in the UK, there is no



Photo: Caroline Frith



specific guidance for how patients like me should be managed. There is even a study – the MARECA study – which was only started last year, whose aim is to determine the frequency, current management, and prognosis of patients diagnosed with my type of recurrence in the UK. I am willing to be part of that study, but it won't help me. It will help those who come after me. So, at the moment, it feels like the treatment chosen for me will be a bit of guesswork – albeit very educated guesswork.

I know I am not an easy patient. I am completely incapable of just accepting what I am told – I have to understand every course of treatment offered, why it has been chosen, and know that it is right for me before I will agree to it. The list of questions I bring to every appointment probably seems infinite to the poor person at the receiving end. But, at the end of the day, I am a medic too – albeit for different species – and I need to know that if the treatment doesn't work, that I was happy with the decisions I made. At some point, I know I just need to trust that the oncologists do know what they're talking about and let them do their job.

#### A taboo subject (April 29, 2022)

In my job, I facilitate death. It is not the first thing people think about when I tell them what I do – I think the assumption is I play with puppies and kittens all day – but one day, all those puppies and kittens become “senior pets”, and sadly, no one's dog or cat lives forever. Owners come to me, and we talk about death. Often in a roundabout way, because people don't like talking about death even though we all know it is one of the few

certainties in life. Years of experience have taught me to interpret what the owners are trying to say, and so I am the one to bring it up because somehow, if it is me who suggests it, then the guilt the owner feels for even thinking such a thing is lessened.

Yet, as a society, we don't talk about death; we use expressions like “tempting fate” if we dare so much as mention it, despite the fact we are all hurtling towards the same inevitable destiny at an unknown moment in time, and facing cancer for a second time before my mid-40s means accepting my own mortality and staring death right between the eyes. Do I want to die? Of course not. Does thinking about these things make it any more likely that I will die? No. So why aren't we better at preparing for the unavoidable conclusion of life?

#### Ride London ✓ (May 30, 2022)

The past week has definitely been a mixed bag. When I wrote my last post, I was cautiously optimistic that I was over the worst for this round, but I couldn't have been more wrong. On Sunday evening, after coming back from a scheduled MRI scan at the Royal London Hospital, I came down with a headache and sore throat, and a bug had unfortunately taken advantage of my weakened immune system – I knew from bloods taken a couple of days previously that my neutrophil count was a mere 0.2.

By Tuesday, I could no longer talk or swallow my own saliva; I was in so much pain. By

lunchtime, out of desperation, I wrote a note (being unable to speak) and headed down to my GP to do battle with the receptionists. First, I was told to come back in an hour (it had taken every ounce of energy to get there in the first place,) then I was offered a telephone consult (I can't talk in case you hadn't noticed), then finally when I flashed my chemo alert card, she gave me an actual in-person appointment with an actual GP. I was prescribed amoxicillin, and within 24 hours, I was a new woman and eternally grateful to Alexander Fleming.

I now had three days to eat all the food and get my strength up for the little matter of a 100-mile bike ride. Mentally, I never doubted myself, and I would have been absolutely devastated if I hadn't been able to do it after months and months of training. It is not in my nature to give up, and cancer wasn't going to win this one. My cycling isn't fast at the best of times; all I had to do was keep fuelling and keep pedalling – and that's what I did for 7.5 hours.

I had a really good appointment with my oncologist this morning – I finally feel like we understand each other, which is so important in my mind. For once, I was seen pretty quickly, and when I went into the consulting room, the waiting room was still half empty. However, when I came out, it was bursting at the seams, and I felt really bad that I had definitely used up more than my allotted five milliseconds of his time with all my questions. I hate that this makes me feel guilty.

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#### Breast Cancer Awareness Month and me (October 29, 2022)

October is Breast Cancer Awareness Month, which, as hard as I try, is difficult to ignore.

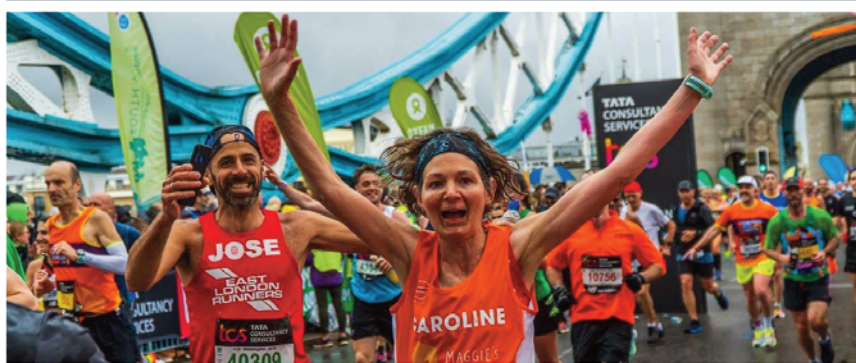
During the month of pink, there is one day, October 13, dedicated to secondary or metastatic breast cancer – that is, breast cancer that has spread to other parts of the body – the type of breast cancer that kills people. I often forget how much (or little) the general public understands about breast cancer because when I was first diagnosed in 2014, I made sure I learned as much as possible about my disease, and with my medical background, I suppose I already had a head start with the terminology.

Did you know that every year, around 11,500 women and 85 men die from breast cancer in the UK? That's nearly 1000 deaths each month, 31 each day or one every 45 minutes.

I have been on drugs for so long I no longer remember the Caroline without them. I

## LONDON MARATHON RUNNER FOR MAGGIE'S NAMED TOP FEMALE FUNDRAISER BY JUSTGIVING

Tuesday 25 April 2023



45-year-old Caroline Frith, who ran the London Marathon for us on Sunday while living with stage 4 cancer, has been named "Top Female Fundraiser" by JustGiving.

Source: <https://www.maggies.org/about-us/news/london-marathon-runner-for-maggies-named-top-female-fundraiser-by-justgiving/> (with permission)

sometimes wonder what I would be like if none of this had happened to me – both physically and psychologically. There is no doubt in my mind I would be a different person because all of us are changed by life events. This obviously gives me a perspective on life that I wouldn't otherwise have, but I cannot go down the rabbit hole of wishing this hadn't happened to me because then I would just spiral into despair.

So, back to awareness. Why is it so important? Because if you catch it early, breast cancer is completely curable. Despite having male breast cancer in a close relative, no one told me this increased my risk. I didn't know women in their thirties got breast cancer, and I rarely, if ever, checked myself. Again, I can't go down the "what if" scenario, but if I'd found it earlier, would my story be different?

However, over the years, several friends have said that because of me, they went to their doctors when they found something that concerned them, so if me telling my story is doing my bit for breast cancer awareness, then I won't bury my head in the sand every October – although I draw the line at wearing pink.

**Did you know that every year, around 11,500 women and 85 men die from breast cancer in the UK? That's nearly 1,000 deaths each month, 31 each day or one every 45 minutes.**

### Step out of the vehicle (February 21, 2023)

Cancerland is a really sad, scary and dark place at the moment. I don't recommend it for a holiday. Just when I thought it couldn't get any worse, guess what? The rollercoaster fell off a cliff.

I appear to have several "metastatic deposits" in my brain, including the original tumour they found before Christmas, which has grown marginally to 2.5mm.

Brain tumours mean an automatic driving ban – that's it, gone. I can no longer get behind the wheel of a car, just like that. I have my bike, which I absolutely will still ride, but I have been cautioned because of the slight risk of seizures.

The plan of action is an MRI of my spinal cord to see if it's opened up shop there as well, cyberknife radiotherapy of the lesions in my brain, followed by a different systemic drug called Enhertu, which is a combination of chemo

and targeted treatment. On paper, it sounds like an amazing drug, really clever. I just wish I didn't have to have it. It's given IV every three weeks, and from reading other people's reports on the dedicated Enhertu Facebook group (yes, there

really is a Facebook group for everything), nausea and constipation seem to be the main complaints. My further research tells me it's partly a monoclonal antibody derived from Chinese hamster ovary cells. The mind boggles.

I guess my 3:30 marathon is out the window as well, but I really hope I can still do it. I cycled 100 miles on chemo last year, so I can damn well run/walk a marathon!

### The "I" word (April 29, 2023)

Many, many years ago, at the London Marathon Expo, I bought a hoodie. In large letters on the front, it says RUN. Then, in very small writing underneath are the words "Be the Inspiration". The irony is not lost on me, given that I have been described as inspirational an infinite number of times over the past few weeks, particularly by people who've never met me.

I ran a marathon on Sunday in under three and a half hours and, in doing so, achieved a long-standing goal of mine, which has made me very happy. Along the way, I somehow raised an extraordinary amount of money for a charity that has come to mean a lot to me over the past year – but I didn't set out to do that. Training for and running the London Marathon was far preferable to me than chucking myself out of a plane or abseiling down a skyscraper, and it gave me a real sense of purpose over the past few months, as opposed to a 5-minute adrenaline rush.

So what now? The only concrete thing in the pipeline is Swim Serpentine in September – a 2-mile open water swim that I have to do in order to get my London Classics medal – the medal awarded to people who've completed the marathon, Ride London and the swim. My marathon time was good enough to qualify for the Boston Marathon next year – a pretty high accolade in running circles – but I would have to enter in the autumn, many months before the event, with no way of knowing what shape I will be in this time next year. In the meantime, I shall enjoy last weekend's marathon success a bit longer and know that I am happy today, whatever tomorrow may bring.

### On and on and on ... (August 4, 2023)

Things have been pretty rubbish, to be honest, and when you're well and truly fed up with something, regurgitating it for others to read about isn't conducive to making you not think about it. But I may as well put pen to paper and hope this has the cathartic effect it usually does.

I've now had two doses of Enhertu, the supposed wonder drug, but have no way of knowing if it's working or not. In the last month or so, I feel like I have been in hospital all the

time, had at least 4 MRI scans, 1 CT scan and more appts than I can remember, so when the poor neurooncologist got me yesterday, he didn't get the usual resilient version of Caroline that just gets on with it, he got the crying version of Caroline who really didn't want to be there any more. We all have our limits, I guess. But I don't get to have a limit; I can't say stop enough, I want to get off. The rollercoaster doesn't have an off switch.

The chemo itself isn't too awful – of the three I've had, I'd say it's the least bad so far. If you follow me on Strava, you'd be forgiven for thinking nothing's going on. I'm swimming and cycling as much as ever, resting a leg injury whilst training for Swim Serpentine in September. I don't feel well; I just don't feel as bad as I thought I would. My hair seems to be shedding a fair amount, and I'm not sure how effective the cold cap is being this time around. My hair itself feels like wire wool and has the much sought-after style of Worzel Gummidge these days, but I still prefer the scarecrow look to boiled egg. The Maggie's Centre has been a godsend these past few weeks, especially yesterday when I was at Bart's for over 8 hours. Just having it there makes such a difference.

Tomorrow, we go on our long-anticipated holiday to Greece, and I don't feel like I've ever needed a holiday as much as I need this one. I'm going with a suitcase full of drugs, expensive travel insurance, a bikini, sun cream, two books, and the people I love.

Caroline's blog, *Here We Go Again*, can be accessed at <https://breastcancerrunner.wordpress.com/>

## Disclaimers

The opinions expressed in this article are the author's own and not necessarily shared by EMWA.



## From the Horse's Mouth

The quarterly pick of the news from the veterinary world

**T**o coincide with World Rabies Day, September 28, the World Veterinary Services (WVS) has announced that 2 million dogs have been vaccinated against rabies through their Mission Rabies initiative, it was reported at MRCVS Online on September 26, 2023. Rabies continues to present a significant health burden globally, being the cause of death of a child every nine minutes and at a cost of \$8.6 billion to the global economy annually.

It is estimated that dogs are responsible for up to 99% of all rabies transmissions to humans, and, as a result, dogs are indiscriminately and inhumanely killed in many parts of the world due to fear of the disease.

Veterinarian Luke Gamble, founder and chief executive of WVS, which became part of the Dogs Trust charity in May 2023, said: "Our pledge is to halve the number of human rabies deaths in the next five years and protect hundreds of thousands of dogs". In the wake of the largest-ever rabies vaccination drive in Cambodia, where 75,000 dogs were vaccinated over ten days, the group's aim to vaccinate 70% of dogs in any given project zone seems eminently achievable. The ultimate goal is to eliminate rabies, thereby saving countless human and canine lives.

**O**n September 25, 2023, *The Veterinary Times* reported on a study recently published in the *PLOS One* journal, which claims that cats fed a vegan diet are healthier than their meat-eating counterparts. Data from the study conducted by researchers at the University of Winchester in the UK, which was derived from owner-reported outcomes, indicated that the 127 cats (9% of the study population) fed on a vegan diet recorded risk reductions for a range of health outcomes, including veterinary visits, medication use, therapeutic diet prescription, and reduced number of health disorders per cat. The authors reported that only one difference was statistically significant; nevertheless, the authors claim the results are evidence that cats fed vegan diets tended to be healthier than those on meat-based diets. These results challenge long-standing "reservations" about feline vegan

diets in the veterinary profession that are based on the currently accepted physiological principle that cats are obligate carnivores and a meat-free diet is detrimental to them. However, any actual health benefits notwithstanding, there is a sustainability argument for feeding pet cats a plant-based diet. In response to this ongoing research, along with similar studies in dogs, the British Veterinary Association has set up the companion animal feeding group to help steer the profession in future policy based on emerging evidence.

**T**he Dog Control Coalition has published its response to the announcement by the UK government of its intention to impose a ban on the ownership of XL bully dogs, it was reported on [bva.co.uk](http://bva.co.uk) on September 15, 2023. The statement by Prime Minister Rishi Sunak was made the day after a fatal attack on a man in Staffordshire, UK, allegedly by two XL Bullies, as well as an attack on an 11-year-old girl in Birmingham, UK, the same week. Although details of the law which would enforce such a ban were yet to be provided at the time of this writing, it is speculated that it will have a similar function and reach as the controversial, "unworkable" Dangerous Dogs Act. This breed-specific legislation came into force in the UK 32 years ago. The Dog Control Coalition argues that the Dangerous Dogs Act is not working, as the incidence of dog attacks on people and other animals has increased over the last three decades. They contend that instead legislation should focus on unscrupulous breeders and irresponsible owners and call for the UK government to engage with them and other stakeholders to implement properly evidence-based legislation and avoid future tragedies.

