

# Getting Your Foot in the Door

## Editorial

Once again, we have two incredible stories in this edition of GYFD. Priyanka shares with us her amazing story and the creative strategy she pursued to get a much needed industry job in corona times.

Equally amazing is Diana's journey from the

pharmacy counter to freelance medical writing, an inspiration to those who are thinking of shifting careers.

To both of you, welcome to the club and happy writing!

**Raquel Billiones**

## SECTION EDITOR



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## If you don't ask, the answer is always no

Growing up in a small town in India, where women hardly work, my only dream was to get a job and be independent. So when I got a PhD position in Germany, it was far more than I had dreamt of. I loved being at the bench and planning and analysing my experiments. I also discovered a newfound love for hiking in the European countryside. But some years into PhD and the constant struggle of my PhD supervisor for a tenured position, made me realise that academia was not a viable career option for me.

I started looking for alternative career paths and reading job ads, which led me to Medical Writing. It seemed like an enticing career option as I always had a penchant for writing, be it writing diaries or letters to people. My PhD also exposed me to scientific writing in many forms and so I felt confident about transitioning to a medical writing career. But, of course, it is difficult to break out of the cocoon of academia, where you are surrounded by scientists with very linear academic paths, which omits much room for flirting with other career paths.

However, I was already aware of the power of networking from the job search of my husband. Just a casual browse in LinkedIn led me to a video where a guy talked about taking initiative and summarised with a powerful quotation: "If you don't ask, the answer is always no". This quotation helped me to break that cocoon, and I reached out to a few medical writers, asking for their advice. The response I got was amazing; these were people who were in the same boat once, so they tried to give the best possible direction they could.

Most medical writers encouraged me to

participate at the EMWA conference to gain more insights and take workshops to gain first-hand experience. I was a bit apprehensive at first, but once at the conference, I felt really welcomed as I met some of the most inspiring people with whom I connected instantly and remain connected. I attended a few workshops and seminars by leaders in medical writing. More importantly, I met my mentor Sarah Tilly of Azur Health Science, who played a huge role in my transition. I took a long-distance mentoring programme under her and learned the basics of regulatory writing.

I was already applying for some time with hardly any response. Although a PhD already equips you with most skills needed for an industry position, I realised that the companies are not so convinced and that they look for industry experience. So, in a desperate attempt to gain further industry experience, I took the initiative to contact Trilogy Writing and Consulting. Looking at my interest in medical writing, they agreed to take me on as an intern for 2 months. This stint gave me the experience I needed on actual regulatory documents and also a sneak-peak on how the medical writing industry worked.

After the internship, I started applying for industry positions, and this time I started getting a more positive response. I guess the companies saw that I had two industry experiences and they showed interest in my CV. Being in Germany, another key factor is learning the language, and it helped that I already had gained B2 level German skills. So I had two job interviews for regulatory affairs jobs and both companies were keen on

hiring me. I was really keen on joining the medical device company that I had interviewed for. But right at that time, life took an unexpected turn for the entire world, and suddenly we were in the middle of the corona pandemic. There was an immediate hiring freeze for most companies and no further communication from both the companies.

I started losing a lot of sleep over my job search as my visa was limited. But extraordinary times demand more initiative and creativity, and I kept thinking about how I could convince the company I was interested in. Just to show my initiative and commitment, I wrote up a piece analysing the company's products with its competitor products. My PhD had trained me very well on scientific evaluation and I could leverage on that experience. And, sure enough, this struck a chord with the hiring manager. He gave me a job offer that very day. This was a lesson for a lifetime – failures and extraordinary times can bring out the best in us. It helps us to be creative and take bold steps. And that is my message to everyone – go out there and be bold, pursue opportunities, and opportunities will pursue you.

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"I had two job interviews for regulatory affairs jobs ... then life took an unexpected turn for the entire world and suddenly we were in the middle of the corona pandemic."

**Foreword:** Diana's article first appeared on Health Writer Hub and is reprinted with permission. Diana is a member of the Health Writer Hub Alumni. Established in 2014, Health Writer Hub is an online education resource for aspiring health writers. Our health writing courses teach you how to create high-quality, evidence-based, easy-to-understand health content. And, because all courses are accredited, independently certified with The CPD Certification Service, you can be confident you're signing up for a quality programme when you enrol. Health Writer

Hub students strive to enhance global health literacy levels and improve health outcomes by creating best-practice, life-changing health content. Passionate about inspiring behaviour change through effective communication, we believe high-quality health writing plays a significant role in creating better public health. Since 2014, more than 1000 students from around the world have taken a Health Writer Hub course. And, at last count, Health Writer Hub students represented 40 countries! Health Writer Hub students are aspiring writers, experienced writers, health

communicators transitioning from an employed role, health professionals, physicians, PhDs and freelancers keen to specialise in health & medical writing. Our Alumni are writers who want to work full-time, part-time, in addition to clinical work and around family commitments. If you're driven by the desire to make a real difference in people's lives through effective communication, visit [healthwriterhub.com](http://healthwriterhub.com).

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## From pharmacist to medical writer

If you had told my 16-year self that I would become a pharmacist, working at a community pharmacy, I would have been delighted. A respectable, high paying (at the time) job, helping others, and keeping in touch with the latest scientific developments was everything I was aiming for.

If you then told me I would graduate from pharmacy school only at 31 years old, after another degree, 10 years as a pharmacy technician, and that I would have a newborn in my arms, I would start to question your sanity.

If you ended the story by telling me that I wouldn't want to work as a respectable pharmacist in a safe job and instead choose to start a career in a semi-obscure field, working as a freelance medical writer...well, in that case I would smile politely and walk away from you. Slowly.

### The wondering pharmacist

I entered the pharmaceutical sciences course knowing I would like to have more options than to work behind a pharmacy counter. While I liked to bridge the gap between scientific knowledge and information that patients actually understand, there were many things that started to grate my nerves. None of those things was related with communication or the human connection with other people, but with management issues, so I started looking for careers in the pharmaceutical industry.

I'd always liked the drug development process, and some of my colleagues had found

roles as clinical research associates (CRAs), working in clinical trials. They said it was a fast-paced industry, with potential of career development, so I decided to do the same.

I applied for a few roles and enrolled in a CRA course aimed at medical and scientific professionals that wanted to increase their chances of getting hired. In the lecture about clinical trial protocols, the instructor had a job title I'd never heard about: medical writer. Hmm.

### Work-life balance

When I finished the CRA course, I faced a challenge that many people have when they try to enter the market: it's hard to get a job when you have no experience. It's hard to get experience if you don't have a job. Internships are one way

to get experience, but they're not easy to get into when you're over 30 years old. An unpaid internship would also mean I would have to leave my paid job. Not ideal.

I was also finding out that some roles, like CRA or medical science liaison, require frequent travel. At this point of my life, having small children, I would prefer to stay close to home.

I decided to know more about that mysterious role I learned about in the CRA course, connected with some medical writers through

Writing is a learnable skill, and one that gets better with practice... but transitioning would require a plan, hard work, and some helpful resources.

LinkedIn, and asked them some questions:

- How did they become medical writers?
- Did they like it?
- What advice would they give someone trying to get into medical writing?

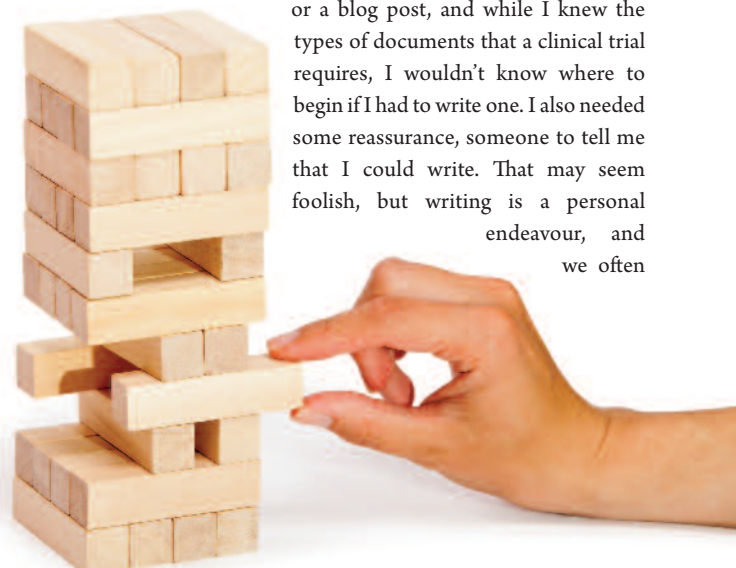
All the medical writers in my network were extremely helpful, giving me resources to explore and a word of encouragement. To continue this tradition, I make a point of replying to every message aspiring medical writers send me.

Slowly, I started to think that it was possible to combine working at home as a medical writing and having enough flexibility to spend more time with my family. It would require a plan, hard work, and some helpful resources.

### Learning how to write

My time in university taught me how to read scientific papers and understand medical jargon, and through the work at the pharmacy I learned how to communicate complex science in simpler terms.

But I didn't know how to write a news article or a blog post, and while I knew the types of documents that a clinical trial requires, I wouldn't know where to begin if I had to write one. I also needed some reassurance, someone to tell me that I could write. That may seem foolish, but writing is a personal endeavour, and we often





feel exposed when we show our work to the world.

Thankfully, writing is a learnable skill, and one that gets better with practice, so I scoured the internet for online or local courses where I could learn the basics of medical writing.

I started with Coursera's Writing in the Sciences, a well-rounded and comprehensive course. It's mostly aimed at academic writing, but it also teaches how to edit ruthlessly (a necessary evil for most writers) and how to write a news article.

Next, I found Health Writer Hub. Starting in a month, the March "Introduction to Health Writing" course was perfectly timed, and Michele's encouraging feedback was the nudge that I needed to start calling myself a medical writer.

## Life as a freelance medical writer

Usually, freelancers work for some years in a pharmaceutical company or in a contract research organisation before going out on their own. By then, they have mastered the basics, they know how long it takes them to produce each document, and they have some contacts that can pass on work.

I had none of that.

To overcome these obstacles, I joined the

EMWA. This professional organisation provides education, resources, and networking opportunities to its members. In 2019, I attended the two conferences EMWA held, in May and November. This allowed me to participate in several workshops and, more importantly, to network with other medical writers, both seasoned and newbies like me. The environment at these conferences is very relaxed, and everyone is nice and keen to help fellow writers.

After a while, I wrote my first article for the association's journal. I co-wrote it with another medical writer that I contacted through LinkedIn and which is now my virtual friend and colleague. When his company needed a proofreader with knowledge of English and Spanish on short notice, he put my name forward and I did that project.

Through interaction with another medical writer and colleague in the EMWA webinar team, I got the chance to make a trial for a local branch of an international medical publishing company. They liked my work and I am now waiting for some regular projects from them.

Networking has been the main way for me to find work. It has also led to meaningful connections and good conversations, an important aspect for those who don't have co-workers to chat with.

There are also other ways to find work, of

course. I have a profile on Kolabtree and I'll soon invest in some niche freelance directories, but so far what has worked for me is networking, volunteering for EMWA, and having a newsletter that showcases my writing style.

## What now?

My journey as a freelance medical writer has just begun. I will keep learning about writing, new developments in drug development, and my new passion: medical devices. I hope my story illustrates the diverse backgrounds medical writers can have, and I hope that you can draw some inspiration from it for your own path.

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