

Getting Your Foot in the Door

Editorial

In this June edition of GYFD, I'd like to share a diagram developed by my colleagues at the Swiss Association of Pharmaceutical Professionals (SwAPP). The diagram serves as a road map for those looking for their place in the healthcare industry. Can you pinpoint those areas where medical writers can get their foot in the door?

Also featured here is the inspiring career journey of Sushma Materla from a postgraduate student to highly experienced medical writer. Happy reading!

Raquel Billiones

SECTION EDITOR



Raquel Billiones

medical.writing@billiones.biz

important role at any given time point of drug development and an essential liaison collaborating with multiple stakeholders like regulatory bodies, patients, caretakers, healthcare professionals, researchers, reimbursement bodies, clinical trial teams, and the general public, etc. Therefore, medical writing is an art of narrating science, tailored to the reader.

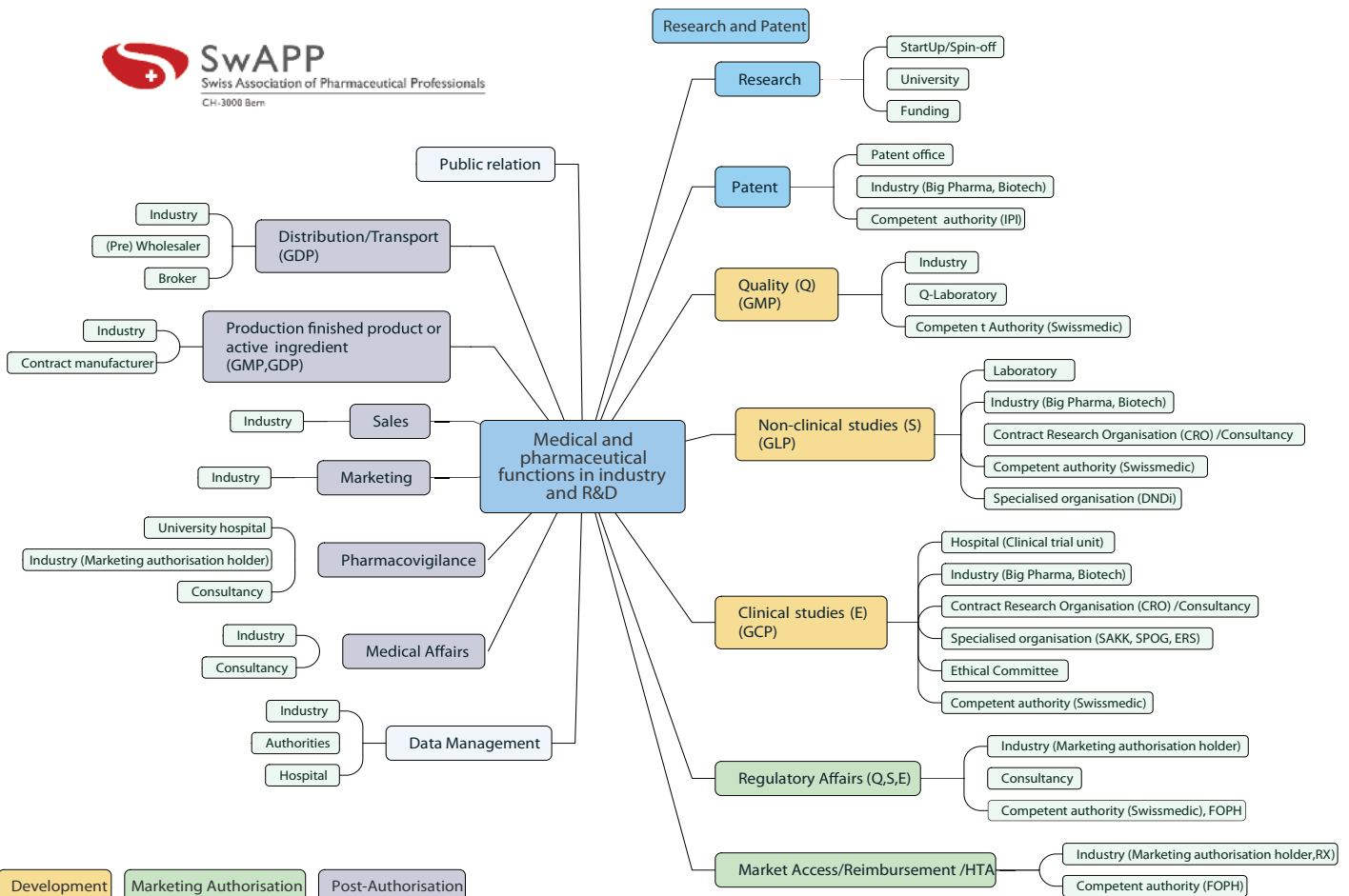
Choosing and chasing a career path certainly isn't easy but as a first step, one needs to be well-informed and passionate to pave their way towards their field of choice. The essence of this article is to guide students or professionals in choosing or building a career path into medical writing. The intent is to provide valuable insights to incite thoughtful introspection about one's preferences for a fulfilling career and sustain the

Medical writing: A walk through my career journey

Scientific advances have come a long way through centuries, yet drug development appears to be in its nascent stages owing to the dynamic ethical and regulatory environment. Its growing popularity over the last few decades has attracted students, academicians, and professionals from various biomedical backgrounds into trying their hands across different fields within drug development. With ample

opportunities comes the challenge to identify an appropriate field that best suits one's academic background, passion, and goals in their career journey. One of the critical areas of drug development is "documentation"; and medical writing is one of the key aspects of documentation that demands vast knowledge of disease areas and extensive skills not limited to writing. A medical writer (MW) plays an

If it wasn't documented, it didn't happen.



Medical and pharmaceutical functions in industry and R&D © SwAPP 2018. (Reprinted with permission)

momentum in building expertise. This is only a basic guidance based on my personal career journey limited to regulatory writing in a corporate pharmaceutical company setting.

Ask yourself: Why medical writing?

More often than not, students' aim is more to grab a job offer than to choose one. It is inevitable that the industry looks for experienced professionals that are best fit for the role. So, it might be very difficult to be amongst the chosen one to get a job of your choice. Nevertheless, there are ample opportunities that companies offer such as summer internships, trainee programmes, campus placements, walk-in interviews, career fairs, and recruitment drives. With a range of options, one should be aware of the extent to which you would be willing to invest your time and efforts in landing yourself a job of choice. To do this, it is critical to introspect on a few key points to understand your interest in medical writing. As a start off, ask yourself these simple questions:

- Does data interpretation interest me?
- Have I enjoyed semester assignments or thesis writing?
- Am I good at converting volumes of data into clear, concise, and meaningful messages?
- Am I keen on keeping abreast with new research trends?

If your answer to these questions is a definitive yes, you might want to consider going into the medical writing field.

When clinical research began as a formal course in India during the mid-2000s, I had no clue on what it was all about. With an inquisitive mindset, I have chosen to take up the 2-year postgraduate course in this field at Cranfield University, UK. During my course work, I realised that I enjoyed reading literature, research trends, and writing my assignments and thesis more than actually doing the project itself. In one of my orientation classes, I attended a session on different job profiles in the pharma and clinical research organisation (CRO) industry. That was when the idea of medical writing struck with me deeply and I knew this is what I wanted to pursue.

Does educational background matter?

The most commonly asked question is, does the area of one's educational background, degree or course matter in pursuing their ambition of a medical writing career? Theoretically speaking,

As we enter an “era of data transparency”, the role of medical writing gains more importance as a “communication catalyst” throughout the drug development process.

this does not impact your abilities to be a MW as long as you are from a field relevant to biomedical science and have the potential skills that the role demands. As competition is tough for every field, landing a medical writing job doesn't come easy. Your additional competencies are what give you an edge over other potential candidates to showcase not only in your resume but also

during an interview. To build such competencies, one could consider taking up courses related to medical writing, drug regulatory affairs, pharma-covigilance, communication skills, etc.

On the other hand, professionals with sufficient experience in other domains (pharmacovigilance, clinical operations, data management, etc.) might want to explore new horizons within clinical research. This is when the question is a bit different: “Would my experience count to transition laterally into the medical writing domain?” Of course, the answer is a “yes”, but it depends on two things:

- First, the duration of a candidate's experience in the current role. A lateral shift might mean descending a level below regardless of the experience one may have had and especially when the intended job demands high technical and functional expertise.
- Second, the level of experience that the job demands. This is certainly challenging for candidates making a lateral move. Therefore, it becomes imperative to understand the job description in depth to be able to justify how their current experience would enable them to perform the job better and quicker than the other potential candidates for the role. This comes with ease when one gains the knowledge of different roles in a project team and understands how to connect their interdependencies.

With growing curiosity in medical writing, I decided to take up a certification course in medical writing during the summer break after my first semester of postgraduate course. I spent nearly 4 weeks together on Google to find a good one amongst a very few institutions which offer such a course. Medical writing was a new concept at that time in my city. I did not regret spending

my holidays doing this course instead of enjoying with my family and friends. I completed this certification course at a medical and marketing communications agency in Hyderabad, India. During the course, I was consistently encouraged by my mentor to explore various domains within medical writing. It also taught me in depth the broad aspects of medical writing unlike the postgraduate programme which focused on clinical research in general.

After completing my postgraduate degree, I revisited my mentor for guidance on job searches, who connected me to some of the MWs in the industry. Despite many referrals and attempts, there was no luck even in getting an interview call. At that time, there was no LinkedIn but there were many job portals. After a few months, I managed to get a few walk-in interview calls, went into direct walk-in interviews and recruitments drives. Yet during the final rounds, I was rejected multiple times by many big and small companies due to a lack of industry experience. This is a default reason that freshers hear from a recruiter. That's when my mentor offered me a job at the same agency where I completed my certification course to handle some of their healthcare writing projects. I couldn't thank him enough and I kick started my career journey in medical writing.

An array of opportunities!

Medical writing offers different areas of expertise which one can steer into. A few of them include regulatory writing, publication/scientific writing, pharmacovigilance writing, clinical writing, medico-marketing communications, health economics writing, scientific journalism, etc. Having all these options to choose from allows one to evaluate professional interests in relation to one's educational background or current domain. More often than not, this is by mere chance rather than a choice that people end up being a MW, probably because of lack of guidance or lack of pursuit. With a rapidly evolving regulatory environment and increasing volumes of “big” data, there is an exponential



growth of medical writing consultancies; therefore, demand for MWs in the market continues to rise. This is the key factor that makes us more empowered than ever to take advantage of choosing a field of expertise within medical writing. Apart from these, the unique advantage of this field is the feasibility of freelancing, unlike any other field within drug development.

After a few months in my first job, I realised that I wanted to purpose my educational background into a more relevant role and chose to explore regulatory medical writing. Just in time, I had a friend who informed me of an internship opportunity at Novartis, Hyderabad. Though I was sceptical of leaving a full-time job for a temporary internship, I took a leap of faith with a hope that my skills wouldn't go unnoticed. I performed well in the interview and finally managed to grab the role of a scientific writer-intern.

Stepping in was a temporary relief but my chances of getting a full-time job after the six-month internship within the organisation was uncertain. It was by chance that I made it to a permanent position. I could never have imagined an informal lunch meeting with my skip level manager turned out to be an informal interview; I only realised this after I was offered the permanent position following a formal interview. I was later told that the reason to hire me was not only my dedication to learn and perform but also my transparency. This was when I learnt that 'integrity' matters both personally and professionally.

Building your career blocks: Enhancing expertise

Making it big careerwise starts with small building blocks to gain the required level of skills to perform the daily job. A simple suggestion is to focus on preparatory reading at any given time point for any kind of project, as this takes precedence over actual writing itself. When we want to keep it short, simple, clear, and concise, we need to process large volumes of information and resynthesise to tailor for the audience of interest. In the end, remind yourself the intended outcome of the document you are writing: what do you want your reader to perceive and what action do you expect them to take? Amongst the many skills required, being meticulous with an eye for detail is the primary attribute one must possess to be a reliable MW.

Career survival and progress comes not only by gaining expertise but also by having the passion to sustain the learning curve. Over the due course,

Being more than a medical writer enables us to shirk the team's perception of our role from a mere "service partner" to a value adding "strategic partner".

gaining experience and expertise becomes naturally important in building career blocks. Some of the options one could consider include leading or contributing to cross-functional initiatives, pilot projects, trainings, conferences, current trends/news, regulatory updates, executive courses, courses with medical writing associations, workshops, coaching and mentoring programmes, informal collaborations, networking, volunteering, etc.

During my tenure at Novartis, I started with short and simple documents like safety narratives and public disclosures and moved on to develop simple Phase 1 to 2 clinical study reports. With advice from my manager and coach, I moved into writing development safety update reports, periodic safety update reports, and risk management plans. As I gained experience with safety documents, I took up complex documents like CTD clinical modules, i.e., summary of clinical safety, summary of clinical efficacy, and clinical overview. While these helped me gain technical expertise in regulatory medical writing, I also actively led and contributed to a few cross-functional initiatives for process streamlining, delivered global trainings, conducted and attended writing workshops, got involved in mentoring programmes, handled vendor management, and led as a "dedicated programme MW" for a compound etc. I attended medical writing conferences to enrich my knowledge and network which gave me an opportunity to be a speaker at a DIA medical writing conference in 2017.

Being a strategic partner

Having to collaborate with multiple contributors in the team requires a MW not only to display writing skills but also to gain their trust to be considered as a valuable and reliable partner. Writers may rarely become authors, but that should not hinder us from displaying our authoring potential as long it is in our purview. Of course, this requires going the extra mile by providing strategic inputs to the project teams; for example, providing expert input on templates, regulatory requirements, processes and workflows, data interpretation, and alternative ways to resolve project issues, etc. Initially, this might seem quite challenging but eventually it comes with experience and in-depth background on project requirements, knowledge of the compound or therapeutic area, and expertise on the document type. Trust me when I say no good performance review feedback gives me more happiness than a direct positive feedback from teams on my strategic contributions beyond writing.

Creating the balance: writing and management

Most MWs enjoy writing and continue to be happy in their individual contributor roles while some move into management roles as they progress in their career. The two roles might seem mutually exclusive but management skills are equally vital for a MW to possess and enhance. Every writing project demands people and project management skills to gather required inputs, tracking milestones, facilitating meetings, collaborating with multiple stakeholders, managing review cycles, etc. Therefore, it is essential to balance the two skills to enable on time completion of high quality deliverables. This is especially important for freelancers because they are their own writers, managers, and accountants.

Pre-define your own success indicators

As one continues to gain experience, it is not uncommon for one to aim for a managerial or an operational position. Not many are aware that this is not the only path to move ahead in the medical writing field. This is a unique field that offers multiple levels of senior roles into functional/technical area like subject matter experts, expert consultants, coaches or trainers, business managers, client/portfolio managers, or project managers. Therefore, before embarking further, one might want to carefully introspect on the reasons for choosing a particular role, keeping in view one's forté.

Currently, I am working as a consultant lead medical writer. After nearly 10 years of experience as a medical writer, I do not regret eschewing a managerial position unlike many of my peers. Career success is subjective and is pre-defined by self. So far, I consider myself a successful MW and continue to do so. My satisfaction lies in accolades from my teams and peers. In the end, I take pride in making a positive impact in patients' lives and companies' future.

The human tendency is to compete for everything because we are programmed to be eternally dissatisfied with whatever we acquire. Conflict is a way of life and it is no different in a professional life. One must realise that career success is not dictated by corporate competition but by your own career goal. Setting this goal and revisiting it regularly comes from one's passion, ambition, and perseverance to be a successful MW.

Sushma Materla, BHMS, MS
Lead Regulatory Medical Writer,
Aixial (Consultant for Sanofi)
sush.taurean@gmail.com