

# Medical Journalism

## How I evolved from a veterinarian to a medical journalist and PR consultant



### Rather a pen than a scalpel

Before I write about my way from vet to journalist, I would like to make clear that neither my love for animals nor my admiration for James Herriot was the reason why I became a vet. When I was a kid, I dreamt, like many little girls, of being a vet because I loved animals and wanted to save them all. But I realised early on that loving animals only seems to be a strong motivation to study veterinary medicine at first glance, and it is not really a good reason to do so.

#### *Unrequited love is not an option*

Loving animals as the only motivation for being a vet would make this career choice frustrating, as most animals hate vets. Lifelong dedication to an unrequited love may be a romantic idea for teenagers, but it is not an option for adults. In addition, as a vet you have to do a lot of unpleasant things, such as monitoring the slaughtering of cattle or doing research on laboratory animals, which are difficult to reconcile with a naïve love for animals. Do not misunderstand me: all the vets I know do love animals, but they are also professionally committed to the well-being of humans, be it in research or in food manufacturing.

I always loved to watch the BBC series 'All Creatures Great and Small', which was produced based on the stories of the veterinarian James Alfred Wight, better known under his pen name of James Herriot. The main character of the series worked as a veterinarian in the 1940s and 1950s in rural Yorkshire. The series was very popular in Germany and created an idealistic image of the veterinary profession. James Herriot was surely the hero of most veterinary students of my age, but we all knew that the vet's life Wight was describing in his stories would have nothing to do with the work of a vet nowadays.

What really convinced me to study veterinary medicine was the broad variety of subjects that vet students have to learn. Veterinary medicine is nowadays so much more than vaccinating cows or neutering cats. I had to learn, for instance, how to distinguish good grazing land from bad, as well as

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receptor theory, which colour of egg yolk consumers prefer, how the complement system functions, how cheese is produced, and tumour cell pathology.

The gap between medicine for humans and medicine for pets is shrinking more and more. Research, diagnostics, and therapy in small animal medicine do not differ much from the methods in human medicine. New treatment options such as immunotherapy and gene therapy are not only tested in laboratory animals, but also they are used in them. In modern veterinary clinics, pets benefit from the results of the latest medical research.

#### *Journalism training*

As much as I liked the variety of subjects of veterinary medicine, I disliked the practical work once I was a vet. I found out that I was much better at explaining complex biological and medical issues to the owners of the animals than doing surgery. On top of this, I always loved writing. My teachers at school regarded me as a gifted writer of German and always encouraged me to study German literature instead of veterinary medicine. After a year of veterinary practice, I realised that my teachers were probably right and that working with words would be a better choice for the rest of my life.

Of course I knew that enthusiasm is not enough to be a professional writer, so I decided to study journalism by taking a year-long postgraduate course. I learned writing techniques for different target groups and media and acquired knowledge of journalistic research, media law, ethics, and standards of good journalism. The course also included training in communication skills and PR.

After finishing the course I got a job as an editor for the pet owner magazines of Gong Verlag, a publishing company in Munich. This period was crucial for getting practical experience in journalism and for learning a lot about the needs and expectations of readers without a medical background.

#### *KISS the reader: Keep it short and simple*

Writing about medical or biological issues for lay readers first of all means thinking about what is really interesting for the audience. What is important for them to know? What is exciting for a scientist may be boring for a lay reader. Students and

professionals often have to read texts which they find exhausting or difficult. Unfortunately, you cannot force buyers of a pet magazine to read a certain article. If the reader is bored, he or she just quits, switches on the TV, or goes for a walk with the dog.

Just as important as finding an interesting subject is making yourself understood. People reading articles during their leisure time do not want to Google technical terms. They do not want to think too hard. If they do not understand a sentence immediately, they will give up. However, even if the reader is interested in the subject and thrilled by the story, he or she will not be willing to spend half a day reading it. Most readers prefer brief texts, so I learned to keep it short and simple.

I really enjoyed my work as a magazine editor, but after two and a half years I quit this job because I had an offer to become the press officer of the Bavarian State Chamber of Veterinarians (Bayerische Landestierärztekammer). As a press officer I could apply the PR knowledge I acquired in the journalism course. I got to write texts for a great variety of readers, including press releases for lay or professional publications, as well as speeches and official protocols. While working as a press officer, I started to write as a part-time freelancer. As I got more and more writing assignments from publishing companies, as well as from clients in industry and commerce, I decided to freelance full-time and left my employment.

#### *Freelancing in the press and in PR*

I have been working as a freelance journalist and PR consultant for nearly 10 years now. Ethically, the combination of journalism and PR is a delicate mixture: as soon as you start working for a company you are inevitably biased, but as a journalist you have to be impartial. So it is crucial to strictly separate PR jobs from journalism. Therefore, as a journalist, I never write articles about products or services I had to deal with in a PR job.

In the past I sometimes had customers who did not understand how important this ethical rule is. It was not always easy for me to decline their projects because it could mean missing out on a profitable contract. But I never regretted these ethical decisions. A lot of my customers appreciate my ethical standards because they know they can trust me.

Confidence, however, is the basis of many jobs I get. For example, I am often involved in

preparations for the launch of a new product. Customers have to rely on my utmost discretion when I am writing press releases, product brochures, or other information months in advance of the actual launch. As many of my clients have been loyal to me for years, they seem to be content with my work and trustworthiness.

#### *Medical writing?*

In the summer of 2012, a client asked me whether I was a medical writer. At that point I had never heard that expression. So I did a little research on the Internet and found EMWA. The broad range of workshops appealed to me and I became a member. I went to my first EMWA conference in Berlin last year and attended my first workshop. I was delighted with the atmosphere at the conference and enthusiastic about the quality of the workshops I attended. While Berlin was superb, Manchester was even better.

I am mainly interested in medical communications workshops, but to open up my horizons I also attend basic workshops on regulatory affairs. I do not know whether I will ever get involved in regulatory writing, but having an idea of what it is and what kind of documents exist has already helped me to communicate better with my clients in the pharmaceutical industry.

I am very happy with my professional life as a medical communicator. The opportunity to continue studying new topics and the great variety of tasks are inspiring. I really love to translate exciting science into understandable and hopefully thrilling stories, be it for lay readers or for doctors (who also appreciate short and simple articles after a long day of hard work).

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## **Author information**

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