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Medical Writing

Medical communication writers: Who are they and what do they do?

Amy Whereat, Guest Editor

For many EMWA members, the meaning of medical communications is a bit hazy. In this issue, we have invited various medical communications specialists to explain who they are and what they do. Their articles will illustrate a few of the varied angles of this somewhat heterogeneous specialty.

What is medical communication?

Medical communications, sometimes referred to as "MedComms", encompasses many different activities that can range from publications, to congress presentations, posters, advisory boards, satellite symposia or standalone meetings. Nevertheless, from a medical writing perspective, it is really all about producing a text that contains a few well chosen key messages, which has a specific purpose and is for a particular audience. Like regulatory writing, MedComms writing is tremendously varied in terms of medical specialty, text and readership, yet also follows certain norms and is supported by a growing number of guidelines. MedComms writing is tremendously varied in terms of medical specialty, text and reader.

Who are medical communication writers?

MedComms writers come from diverse backgrounds, indicating that the skills required for this area are highly transferable from either academia or industry. Most have a scientific background and are usually highly qualified. Some work for agencies, others in-house and an increasing number turn to freelancing.

MedComms writers are very flexible. They love to delve into one scientific area, pull out the essential information and then dive into another. They usually juggle several projects at the same time. Sound familiar?

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What do medical writers do?

As MedComms is the interface between clinical research and promotion, the need to understand marketing and communication is paramount. For an academic group, this might mean communicating their research, increasing the profile of their research group or international renown. However, for a pharmaceutical company, marketing means ensuring that doctors and other health professionals have access to and know about the medicines and devices they have developed.

Pharmaceutical marketing is about choosing appropriate strategies to make their products available. This involves a mix of pricing (reimbursement), packaging or place (choosing where best to sell the product or device). Not all medical products are bought in a pharmacy with a prescription. Some are sold directly to hospitals, others to specialised clinics or even a supermarket. One part of the marketing mix is communication, the specific activities by which companies communicate to their clients and stakeholders about a disease area, a service or a product. Communication strategies are sometimes developed in-house but are more often developed in collaboration with an agency or a medical communications consultant. Specific activities are chosen depending on the communication objectives (what needs to be said) and the needs of the end user or prescriber (who are you talking to, where and when?).

Classical medical research communication activities include

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publications, posters and international symposia. However, the pharmaceutical industry has developed other activities such as sponsored satellite symposia, advisory boards, or stand-alone meetings. These activities facilitate discussion between opinion leaders, researchers and sponsors. They also provide a forum for experts to share their ideas and build guidelines and recommendations, foster continued research or share experiences. Medical communications writers are involved in all these activities from planning the event to writing or checking slides as well as producing brochures or even publications from these meetings. Native English writers can (and should) also work closely with non-native speakers to ensure that their voice is heard and that their knowledge does not get lost in translation.

I would like to thank all the contributors to this special edition who have shared their advice, experience and precious time. I would also like to thank our fearless editor Phil Leventhal for, firstly, raising the profile of MedComms within EMWA and, secondly, giving me the opportunity to orchestrate this edition. I've had the pleasure of meeting some very talented and enthusiastic people along the way. I hope this might elucidate some aspects of medical communications writing and perhaps even inspire some interest to get more involved in this exciting front in medical writing.

Kent Careers' Fair – Entry into the Industry

On Wednesday January 20, 2016, Canterbury Christ Church University Life Sciences students were given the opportunity to discover potential career opportunities in life sciences at a fair organised by their department. We were able to network with the other presenters, who portrayed two aspects of careers within life sciences. On the one hand, pharmaceutical industry recruitment agencies and various suppliers were represented, and on the other, there were ecology organisations such as the National Trust and some local wildlife conservation trusts. I focused on presenting pharmaceutical industry careers within regulatory affairs and medical writing. It is always a pleasure to present aspects of a job I have done for nearly 20 years to young people embarking on careers in science. Visitors were keen to ask questions and we covered many topics including pharma in the news, how benefits and risks of medicines are monitored and balanced, and what a job would include on a day-to-day basis.

Questions included how graduates first enter the industry; the advice given was to approach individual pharmaceutical companies for intern posts and summer jobs. The Life Sciences course at the university is developing a drug development module, and it was a chance to think a little from an employer's point of view as to which skills could best be nurtured during their time in Canterbury. It made me think that EMWA Professional Development Programme and TOPRA's (The Organization for Professionals in Regulatory Affairs) Basics of Regulatory Affairs course both offer elements that could be incorporated into a suitable module.

It is always energising talking with young people looking forward to their careers and their enthusiasm was quite delightful, as evidenced by all my EMWA and TOPRA literature disappearing into their hands. I left hoping that the industry is ready to train these bright young minds and make the most of a new generation of life sciences students.

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