

Getting Your Foot in the Door

SECTION EDITOR



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Editorial

“Pharmacists can only work in pharmacy”. **False!** Prior to my studies in pharmacy, I thought so until I had an introductory course at the university and heard about many career opportunities after completing a diploma. Still,

the lecturers stressed that at least 95% of pharmacists work in pharmacy and that it is not common for them to work elsewhere. Virginia Chachati had a similar experience and found her new career path in challenging times. Her calmness, devotion, and courage opened a door

to medical writing and she realised her heart’s desire just as Zen Master Dogan Zenji said: *“When both body and mind are at peace, all things appear as they are: perfect, complete, lacking nothing.”*

Ivana

From pharmacist to medical writer

A pandemic level catalyst

Picture this: you just got married, signed your first mortgage contract, and started a new job. Your husband has an amazing opportunity to work abroad, and you’re going with him. The plan is to move in summer. The next thing you know, a pandemic hits.

This is the story of the fast-paced life changing decisions, wins, and losses, that shaped me into the medical writer I am today.

Choosing family over work

My journey started in 2019, when there was talk of a new virus that was about to plunge the world into uncertainty. I had started my new job as a pharmacy manager in January 2020. Three months later, lockdown hit in March.

My heart was torn between protecting my loved ones and doing my day job. You see, my husband has type 1 diabetes and my father, over 70, has a heart condition. The panic and fear in the community became overwhelming while I was working at the pharmacy. I felt unprotected and vulnerable, forcing me to quit my job in April.

I switched to working part time as a locum pharmacist (a freelance or temporary pharmacist, where I work at different pharmacies on short term contracts) to reduce my overall exposure to COVID 19. I also started packing, in preparation for moving house from London to Germany in July, 2020.

Writing my way out

While working part time as a locum pharmacist from April 2020, I got interested in educating people about health online. At the same time, we started to pack as the COVID 19 lockdown

started to lift for the summer. I set my sights on getting out of being a locum pharmacist and looking for a job I could do from anywhere with an internet connection. This was with a view to working remotely to reduce my risk even further – and to avoid having to wear a mask for more than 10 hours a day, which was the most uncomfortable part of working as a locum pharmacist.

I needed a job that I could do in Germany as, although my Master of Pharmacy degree was valid, I couldn’t be a pharmacist there without speaking German up to B2 level (which would take up to 2 years to learn and is considered a high level of fluency). After a lot of research, writing and creating health content drew me in. I could make use of my knowledge and experience as a pharmacist and maintain my registration with the GPhC (which is a professional register for pharmacists and the equivalent of the GMC – the register for doctors). After all, it took 4 years to complete a Master’s degree, then 1 year of training and a registration exam to become a pharmacist. The idea of reaching more people with helpful health knowledge excited me.

The steep learning curve

To get started, I decided to create my own blog website. This gave me a platform to learn both the structure of a website and a space to practise my writing. I was also inspired by healthcare professionals on YouTube and wanted to get

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involved with creating videos. I learned to write scripts and I taught myself search engine optimisation (SEO) using online resources. At this point I had a lot on my plate.

The learning curve became even steeper as I became a landlady! I had looked into using a property management company to look after our flat in London, and decided the expense was too

much. So I took on the task of learning the laws and regulations around renting out our one-bed flat. I knew I would have to dedicate a lot of time to understand them fully.

But in July 2020, it was time for the big move abroad. We had put down a deposit on an unfurnished flat to rent in Germany. We slept on the floor on our first night as we waited for the furniture to be delivered the next day. Our first days were spent building furniture and learning about the shops and amenities

nearby. After one week, my husband started his new job as a teacher in an international school, and I returned to the UK. This was a truly challenging time for us to separate as we were both undertaking new life experiences. I then spent 5 months continuing to work part time as



a locum pharmacist and learning property management. I managed to secure a tenant by November 2020 and luckily got back to Germany that same month, before the Christmas lockdown.

Winning and losing

As my confidence grew during my learning, I entered a competition to become a script writer for a pharmacist channel on YouTube. I won! I beat 900 other UK registered pharmacists, validating my growth as a writer. By November, I was back in Germany with a new tenant, a new job, and a world of opportunity.

It felt as though the wins were rolling in; on my flight back to Germany, I met the son of the CEO of a nutrition company. After a great conversation, he linked me with their UK team to create a video for their brand. Unfortunately, this was where my first loss occurred as I agreed to work with no contract and only a promise of payment. The worst outcome came true as my hard work was never remunerated.

But I didn't lose motivation; each challenge was simply a lesson and the next chance was not far off. An online pharmacy contacted me to read

over and edit some pages for their website. Although I was wiser about payment, I made the new mistake of undervaluing my work. To keep myself going, I focused on the portfolio of work I was building and my internet presence growing. I knew it would all be worth it in the end; I just had to believe in the learning-process and keep pushing.

To supplement my income in Germany, I worked part time at my husband's school from December 2020. I was creating lessons for grade 3 to grade 10 as a science teacher and in charge of COVID 19 testing at the school. My portfolio was huge at this point, and I loved the variety of writing I was creating.

The power of SEO

I started to get serious about breaking into medical writing when my temporary contract at the school was going to end in June 2021. So I jumped onto LinkedIn and started to flesh out my profile. I rewrote my CV and I started applying to jobs like I had nothing to lose with little success.

I finally caught the eye of a recruiter looking to fill a position at a healthcare agency. I was so

anxious at this point as the end of my paid work with the school was rapidly approaching. I was scared it was just going to be another rejection, it felt like I was trying to find the impossible – a job in the UK where I can work from home in Germany. I once again had to push past these feelings of low self-esteem and just go for it.

My foot in the door

The healthcare agency contacted me for an interview! It only took until May 2021, almost 18 months after my journey began, I had finally gotten my foot in the door! I was super relieved and felt so blessed at that moment in time. It had been such a hard year and I was ready to be a full-time medical writer.

I officially started work in July 2021 as a senior content manager and medical copywriter. I learnt how to communicate with clients, train writers, and manage a team. This was on top of working with everyone remotely and learning how to navigate software I hadn't used before. It seemed that I had reached the first plateau of my learning curve and the rest is history.

Moral of the story

My biggest piece of advice to anyone wanting to get into medical writing is to never give up. This is a journey into new territory and you must have confidence in your skills and your knowledge. Relish the challenge and keep on pushing until you get where you want to be.

Keep networking and remember to be kind to yourself. Good luck!

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Disclaimers

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

Author information

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