

Getting Your Foot in the Door

SECTION EDITOR



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Editorial

It's been almost six months since the first EMWA Internship Forum (IF) in Munich. See what our IF team have to say about their first IF experience on pages 62-63.

Even though we are already planning the next one for the spring meeting in Birmingham in May 2017, we also need to look back at the lessons we learned in Munich. And more important, we want to know whether the IF is serving its purpose. So I requested IF

participants to share with us a status update on their quest of getting into medical writing. We are happy to hear from Sara Rubio who landed an internship through IF. Zou Yen Lee did not get an internship but nevertheless is determined to get into the field and finding creative ways of gaining knowledge and experience while applying for medical writing jobs. Ananya Malladi missed the IF by a couple of months. But she's making up for lost time by gobbling up all information she can find on the EMWA website

and other resources about medical writing. Three aspiring medical writers with three different stories to share. I think we all agree, they have come to the right place.

Finally, I thank Kathryn Lee for sharing with us her experience as speaker at a careers event in the UK. We need more people like her to engage with and mentor the likes of Sara, Zou Yen and Ananya!

Raquel

EMWA's first *live* Internship Forum: Bringing opportunities to life

When I first read about the EMWA Internship Forum (IF) earlier this year, an exciting thought crossed my mind: "This must be it! The opportunity I need!" I had been looking for an entry-level position as a medical writer for months, but none of my applications had the happy ending I was hoping for. Coming from a basic research academic environment, the path to a role in the fast-paced, commercial environment of medical communications is not easy. Neither for me nor for the many people in my same situation whom I met along the way. But difficult does not mean impossible... and my example is just one of the many cases out there.

Back to May 2016. There I found myself,



Sara Rubio

along with some people I had met during the EMWA conference, at the *Live* IF in Munich. The first detail I noticed was the excellent onsite organisation, which was in line with the great online information about the EMWA internship programme on their webpage. The second feeling, immediately noticeable, was the excitement and eagerness of both the applicants and the company representatives to start meeting and chatting. Wasn't that a sign of how this initiative was much needed?

The first half of the *live* IF consisted of appointments that we had booked beforehand via the application on the EMWA website. In my case, I did not have so many prearranged meetings, but the organisers solved this situation by matching me with free slots that some companies still had (again, thumbs up for the awesome organisation!). The company representatives were genuinely enthusiastic and made the most of the ten-minute chat with each applicant. I had the time to show my motivation, hear about the company and the potential internship, and still ask a few burning questions.

During the free time between appointments with companies, we had the chance to speak with some of the IF organisers who were sharing advice on how to improve and showcase our skills, how to get that elusive first interview... Actually, one of the best aspects of the forum in particular, and of the EMWA conferences in general, is the ease of interaction with everybody and the willingness of people to help others. I am still amazed at how many delegates I talk to every time I go to an EMWA conference!

The second part of the forum was an informal

meet-and-greet session, where people were able to mingle whilst having drinks. Many participants stayed well after the official closure of the session, again showing how productive the experience was. I am glad to hear the forum is intended to be a recurrent event at the spring conferences. Even more, I would suggest implementing an autumn session in the future, logistics allowing, to make room for the many companies and applicants that I am sure would like to join the initiative in the coming years.

The icing on the cake of my experience is the amazing internship I started recently at Costello Medical Consulting (UK), where I am learning so much and putting my skills into practice in real projects... and that's thanks to the EMWA IF! I am indebted to the organisers and to all the people I had the chance to interact with. As I mentioned earlier, the transition from academia to a career in medical writing is a challenging journey, but one definitely worth taking if you are passionate and have the skills for it. Fortunately, initiatives such as the EMWA IF are easing the way to applicants while providing the medical communications industry with enthusiastic and dedicated people.

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Editor's Note: Check out the Costello Internship Programme in the *GYFD*, *MEW* Sept 2016 issue.

EMWA Internship Forum: My journey six months on

Towards the mid-term of my PhD study, I knew that I would leave academia and research, but I did not have a clue to which field I would make my career move. One thing that was certain was that wherever I go, I wanted to use my scientific training. I talked to alumni of my institute who have made their move to the industry, visited career fairs to find out the industrial options available for life scientists, and attended workshops to learn to identify what other competencies I possess apart from scientific research. None of the job roles seemed to have the glowing attraction I needed for making the decision – that was until I wrote my paper and dissertation towards the end of my PhD. I rediscovered the joy of writing! So science plus writing give an evident answer: medical writing is the career step I want to take.

In the process of searching for an entry into medical writing, I was excited to come across the Internship Forum (IF), which was held in conjunction with the EMWA 2016 Conference in Munich, catered to beginners wishing to step into the profession. Nothing is more direct than gaining hands-on experience in a professional environment in preparing for a medical writing career. On the same day of the forum, I attended both Helen Baldwin's Introduction to Medical Writing and Phil Leventhal's Getting Your Foot in the Door seminars. They provided illuminating information on the job profile of medical writers, as well as the reality that the entry into



Zuo Yen Lee

medical writing might not be as “grand” as I imagined it would be. The registration for the participation in the IF was straightforward. Ten companies were offering internships and seven of them were present in the forum. I was lucky enough to be granted a slot by two companies, and grabbed the chance to introduce myself to the others at the following open session during which everyone was invited to interact with their companies of interest. It was an encouraging atmosphere to find numerous other aspirants around me responding to questions and discussing with the companies' representatives. Moreover, I truly enjoyed the informal and flexible setup of the forum.

From the overwhelming response of attendees in the forum, the internships available were way outnumbered by the applicants, with more than half of us bound to be turned down. I only hope that there will be more companies willing to jump on the internship bandwagon and hence offer more opportunities to motivated beginners. With the rapid growth of pharmaceutical and biotech industries in Asia-Pacific, multinational companies should create more internship opportunities in medical writing in this region. This could potentially kill two birds with one stone; it not only increases the availability of internship positions, it may also smooth the transition of biotech professionals originating from Asia-Pacific region to take up a position where they could maximise both their scientific expertise and inter-cultural competence.

Six months on since the forum, I have realised the catch-22 situation for an academic to enter the field. Despite having some years of experience in the diagnostic industry and a good writing record, the scarce entry level opportunities has urged me to be more creative in earning the relevant experience that will put me in a better position in making my first step in the door. Apart from burrowing through job openings, I continue to network with new and experienced medical writers through personal contacts and attending events like the Global Publication Planning 2016 in order to seek advice, gain information about writing agencies and any window of opportunity.

Furthermore, I am also equipping myself with clinical research and regulatory affairs knowledge by taking online courses and participating in the Regulatory Affairs Certificate Program run by the Regulatory Affairs Professionals Society (RAPS) to boost my competence spec-

ifically in regulatory medical writing. Through these, I have learnt not to limit myself on one single path to enter medical writing but to utilise my writing skills and the newly gained knowledge for positions in regulatory affairs and clinical trial management, which to an extent share overlapping functions with medical writing.

The IF has indeed provided me a few important road signs in my transition from academia to medical writing. The journey is still going on, and ‘all roads will lead to Rome’.

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Editor's Note: *One of the major hindrances that non-EU citizens like Zou Yen face is the issue of work permit. We hope to address this in upcoming editions of GYFD.*

Getting on the medical writing train

I have spent all my life studying. No, not because that's what I chose, but because I'm only finishing my Master's degree now at age 22. Schooling wasn't my choice. By the time I could fully comprehend why I had to go to school and that school just wasn't all about sharing lunch with the other kids, I was a quarter through. Then came the time to elect the majors. I went for biology because algebra and trigonometry were my worst nightmare's worst nightmare. Fortunately, though, I fell in love with the subject and spent three years learning the basics of microbiology (a favourite), genetics, and molecular biology. Then I set out to Germany to do my Master's degree in molecular biology, with the aim of pursuing a PhD afterwards. Going through the innumerable job search websites and a bunch of rejections later, I realised I had no special trick up my sleeve. I never learnt a computer language nor specialised in operating a complicated microscope. English fluency was my strongest card and I was looking for options where I could put this to the best possible use.

After spending a whole week with an existential crisis, one fine day, a PhD student in my lab asked if I could help her with a grant she was writing. Having never written a grant in my life, I was frank about my inadequacy for the said task. She said it didn't matter at all because I just had to check the grammar (as she wasn't a native English speaker and I was). Observing the ease

with which I could present her subject in a polished way, she recommended a book called *Career Planning for Research Bioscientists* by Sarah Blackford. This book briefly details the alternative career options available for bioscientists and helps one figure out through a series of activities the best fit. Twenty pages into the book, I was shocked to realise there existed a career option called Medical Writing. A few quick web searches later, I was planning a life around medical writing as a special skill and a field for my PhD.

The first link of contact was a freelancer in Berlin. I thought it would be great to write to her, ask her if I could work as an apprentice under her supervision and get the basic understanding of the workings in this field. I was



Ananya Malladi

pretty optimistic, because who wouldn't want free help? Right! Right? Only then came the very polite reply about how she wasn't writing anymore but was teaching how to write. On the bright side, though, she provided me with a bucket of useful information about organisations that could help people like me. The first was EMWA. It was close to three months ago when I first opened their homepage. I took my own time to get familiarised with the organisation, their events, the way it works, all the previous and the upcoming events. Then I started attending the webinars, one at a time, all of them. I always had the EMWA page open in one of the tabs, and I was watching every update they posted, like a stalker.

By this time medical writing was no longer a skill I wanted to acquire, it was a career choice. I was so passionate about this field, I had a nagging sense of unfulfilment when I didn't do anything related to medical writing for a day or two. During these searches, I found a whole lot of reading material on the internet. Two of the most helpful reads to start a journey to this field are *Science Research Writing* by Hilary Glasman-Deal and *From Academic to Medical Writer* by Annick Moon. After getting the basic knowledge I was suddenly worried my inexperience would haunt me and took every opportunity to change this. I took a poster that summarises the work of our research group and translated it from German to English with my elemental knowledge of the former. It was very basic, but it gave me a boost of confidence. The more I searched on the internet, the more resources I found. I attended a free course on the basics of medical writing offered by Duke University. I made copies of any reading materials I found on medical writing, including articles from *The Write Stuff* archive and carried them everywhere I went. I read the articles

during my daily commute, during lunch hours and as bedtime tales. During my stalking, I stumbled upon the volunteer section and approached the members of the EMWA executive committee (EC). I enquired if I could help as a volunteer despite my lack of experience in this area. I received a response within hours and my first task was to help them review a draft of *A Career Guide to Medical Writing* from a beginner's point of view. Working on that document, I learned more about a career in medical writing than I did during the three months of wandering around the web. I also had the opportunity of interacting closely with Raquel, an EC member and EMWA journal associate editor who answered my numerous questions. Another useful source of information is MedCommsNetworking Community (www.medcommsnetworking.com). Their weekly letter is a wonderful compilation of tips for freelancers, reviews of past events, updates on upcoming events, and job vacancies.

So what's on the horizon? After having been advised on the importance on having knowledge over a vast number of subjects, I started attending a free online course on statistics. This has proven to be more fun than I anticipated. I also have an online medical writing course at the Stanford University coming up (due to students' perpetual poverty, free online courses are a boon). As it is already evident that I am a big fan of EMWA, I look forward to spending some quality time on my application for the Geoff Hall Scholarship. I am also eager to contribute to the EMWA journal, starting with this piece.

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Engaging with tomorrow's medical writers

In May 2016, after volunteering to help with a careers event at the University of East Anglia (as a freelancer living locally), I was asked to speak about medical communications at a session for PhD graduates and research staff.

After providing an overview of the different types of medical writing activities, my presentation focussed on regulatory writing within the pharmaceutical industry, including the skills required, personal tips for success and raising awareness of available resources (including EMWA). Representatives from

medical communications agencies spoke about recruitment and example career pathways; the session concluded with an interactive question and answer session.

The event was very well attended and positive feedback indicated a strong interest in medical communications as a career option. Students felt informed about the diverse backgrounds and careers of medical writers and gained an understanding of skills which could be transferred from academic research.

From a personal viewpoint, as someone in

the Out On Our Own community, it was an excellent opportunity to share knowledge and experience to inspire others. I was subsequently asked to consider joining the University student mentoring programme – allowing further sharing of expertise and promotion of our rewarding profession.

Kathryn Lee

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